RICE

LOUISE JORDAN MILN

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

IT HAPPENED IN PEKING
RUBEN AND IVY SÊN
IN A SHANTUNG GARDEN
MR. AND MRS. SÊN
THE FEAST OF LANTERNS
MR. WU (*the novel*)
THE GREEN GODDESS (*the novel*)
IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD
THE SOUL OF CHINA
RED LILY AND CHINESE JADE
THE FLUTES OF SHANGHAI
BY SOOCHOW WATERS
RICE

R I C E

A NOVEL

By

LOUISE JORDAN MILN

"One would need to be a god to decide which are the failures and which the successes of life."

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To

DAGMAR

FOR WHOM HER MOTHER WROTE IT

Frimley. Suffolk. Dorset. Vienna.

RICE

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CHAPTER I

THE *k'ang* was scarcely comfortably warm, and Pang Kee's painfully gathered horde of twigs and leaves, stacked against the wall, was low now. The fire in the *k'ang* would smolder out before daybreak, unless she replenished it soon, and if she did the low pile of firing would be quite gone. And already her pain had come.

It was bitterly cold. Pang Kee's hands were numb under her padded quilt, and one was torn from the thorn bush she had resolutely broken off and carried back to her hut across three *li* of trackless snow. Her lips were stiff with pain, and her legs were cramped.

The woman was alone. And she knew that her hour had come. Twice before, she had given birth, and she knew the pain that gripped her—the pain apart, like no other. But she had not been alone in those other times of peril and pain; and there had been food—though rough and not too much—on shelf and in earthen crock; there had been companionship close beside her, women's helping hands, human kindness, abundant warmth, hope in her heart; and Pang Lee had waited outside the door to come when the women called him, to come and congratulate and thank her, if it proved a boy, and to welcome their child. She never had been afraid of Pang Lee; she never had had need to be; and she had known that even if the raw, red, squirming fruit of her long hours of unique agony proved to be only a girl, Pang Lee would neither

upbraid nor scowl. For Pang Lee the toy-maker had been a gentle man, and gentlest and kindest of all to Pang Kee his wife.

But now she was alone—alone in the dark and the cold. The wind howled and hounded at the hut door and bleated and wailed at the tiny high-up window. Even in her torture of child-birth pain she hoped that the window-pane of tough oiled paper would hold.

A drink of hot water would help, she thought, and certainly would comfort, if only she could get to the kettle. And then she remembered that the kettle could not be boiling—scarcely warm from the heat of so nearly heatless a *k'ang*.

Perhaps nothing else, of all that could be told, so tells the poverty of Pang Kee, and the desolation of her one-roomed hut, as that there was no hot water to drink. Whatever a Chinese house lacks, it rarely lacks hot drinking water. One may be too poor to buy tea—often one is, if a peasant in the storm months of Shantung's relentless winter—but who is too poor to keep the kettle full and steaming beside the brass drinking pot on the weed-and-twig-stuffed *k'ang*? Pang Kee was.

She had barely a change of garments. Her coats, for none can live through a Shantung winter without several thick coats, were made of coarse sacking that she repadded from time to time with down she gleaned from the low-growing cotton bushes when the cotton harvest was over, gleaned as Ruth did after the owners were done—gleaned and horded; and with feathers the birds dropped on the wayside; with bits of cloth and scraps of paper she found on great-luck days. And her three quilts matched her coats inside and out. She made her shoes on summer nights while the outer light still held, and she was too weary to trudge longer back and forth in search of fuel or food or work.

And this home-room of hers—the only home she clearly remembered, for hers had been a "rearing marriage" when

she was only six—was as bare of superfluities as was her toil-worn body; it boasted neither stool nor bench, table nor chest. The Hearth-god (Tsao Shên, the Kitchen-god), a little shapeless figure of gray, unglazed clay, had neither candle nor joss-stick, neither artificial flower nor red-paper-prayer beside it on the shelf above the *k'ang;* the food-shelf on the other wall held nothing but dust. A cooking-pot, a basket, a basin in which the woman washed herself, all stood on the hard mud floor; her scant winter coats lay on the floor beneath the window, and on them lay a poor array of tiny garments a little softer than they, managed and made only Kwan the Mother of Mercy and the woman writhing on the fast-cooling *k'ang* knew how. A pair of worn chop-sticks, that never had been painted or really smooth, lay in the empty cooking-pot and were her only eating convenience.

There was not even a faded good-luck scroll on the rough stone wall. But an abacus, too old and worn to sell, too loved and cherished to burn even now—if it would burn: the beads were of bone—was fastened on the wall. The scrap of window was thickly paned with well oil-soaked paper; and that, except for a square of salt and its drip-pan, was all—all the room showed, all the woman had in the world.

Kee lurched from the *k'ang*—her only bed or seat for years now—found the floor with a moan of bitter pain, and crawled to the corner. Mercifully it was not far, for the room was not more than big-cupboard-size. She crawled back to the *k'ang* with all she could carry of her last store of twigs and leaves, and caked dung, and stuffed them into the low-smoldering fire through the hole she uncovered in the great stove's side. Three more times she contrived the crawled journey to and fro; and then all she had in the world that would burn was in the *k'ang—all,* unless she fed the fire with her few coarse clothes, or with the great square of salt that hung from the ceiling, a shallow pan beneath it to catch its drip when the room's heat

moistened its edge a little. The moisture dripped down the daily dole of salt without which even such simple cookery as Pang Kee's would be unthinkable—and even more unpalatable, more unwholesome, than the monotony of its coarse unvaried ingredients made it.

Back on her bed on the *k'ang*, smothering herself again under her quilts, quivering from the strain of climbing again to her one poor refuge, the woman half swooned, half dozed. The *k'ang* grew warmer. Her body grew easier. What matter that in physical agony's desperate extravagance she had stuffed all the morrow's possibility of lukewarm comfort into the smoldering fire? Her pain was eased, heat did its great medicinal work—heat, the most comforting drug in nature's pharmacopœia. The woman's twisted limbs relaxed and were at peace; she slept, lulled by the luxury of warmth into oblivion of what was to come. The woman slept, and in her sleep she dreamed—and smiled, reliving again in a few beneficent minutes all the years of her married life.

That she had cried when she had left her own mother—shedding the pitiful tears of frightened childhood, not the conventional wailing that etiquette exacts from a seemly bride—had been blurred and then wiped away from her baby mind before she had been for a year a wife; and all her dream—years crowded into minutes in dream-life's mysterious way—was sweet and good.

Her new parents had been kind to the child they had secured so young a wife to their eight-year-old son, that they themselves might rear and train her as servant-daughter of their daughterless, servantless home. And she and her boy bridegroom had chummed at once. For two or three years they had played together far more than they had toiled; and the easy tasks they had shared had been more play than hard work. For the older Pang and his wife, poor enough, but not then desperately pinched, were naturally kind, and were wise in a thrifty peasant way. They had no mind to stunt by over-toil or under-feeding

the body of the boy whom they loved, and whose worship in after years at their graves was essential to their welfare in the Yellow Springs and On High, whose ability to do a man's work was the only capital they could put by for their declining years, or the body of the girl-child who would bear the grandsons whose grave-side worship was as essential to their future welfare as was Pang Lee's.

They had had their tasks, even from their wedding-day, she and her husband, as every Chinese peasant child has—must have—but their young toil had not been over-taxing or disagreeable. To gather sticks—the chief of their tasks—from the flower-sprinkled coppice, with many a break of gay play, and see who could gather the most in the shortest time, but never to gather more than they could carry home easily enough—for it was forbidden—was nearer sport than drudgery. To ride off together on Mo Ho the donkey's patient back to the edge of the hillside, and watch the red fire the charcoal burners made of the trees, to laze on the ferns and bracken until the charred fuel was cool enough to be cautiously garnered into the paniers that Mo Ho carried slowly back to the little homestead, Lee prodding him vigorously from behind, Kee pulling him sturdily from in front, was splendid fun. To fill the bucket at the well, to watch the melon-patch, to search the path for bits of rag and useful leaves, was no great hardship.

And, if they had to work, they had always the monthly festival to look forward to, to enjoy hugely and to talk over until their furious little tongues had worn it threadbare, had golden days when there were theatricals in the booth outside the temple at Kuan Hsien. They had the excitement of market-days in the nearest "great" village, sometimes a market-day in the walled *fu* town itself, had story-tellers to hear and jugglers to see now and then, had great sport in the burying-ground when their parents visited the honorable graves. And always when the year's first moon was new, a thin sickle of soft green-gold in the star-pricked sky, they had had from the hour-of-the-

tiger, for fifteen long jubilant days, the crowning joys of the Lantern Festival—always a new red robe each and their little bellies full of the sweet, rich lantern-cakes, freedom and frolic and the witchery of the lantern lights.

They quarreled sometimes and scolded back and forth shrilly, and now and then Pang Kee beat Pang Lee as hard as ever she could, but Pang Lee never hit Pang Kee back, and was always the first to laugh again and make it up.

Their childhood passed in more comfort than discomfort, more of mirth than of care. And if their simple pleasures and simpler fare were much of a muchness, so had their ancestors' been for unvaried centuries; contentment and acceptance were in their blood, and in their bones too, and neither knew that there were god-pampered children who always fared softly, had sweetmeats every day, ate fish and eggs as a matter of course, wore silk, had their winter coats padded with eiderdown and lined with down-soft fur, used ivory chop-sticks and played with shop-bought toys.

They had been man and wife in fact as well as in name and Chinese etiquette when Pang Lee's father died and the mother hanged herself at the funeral, not thinking it worth while to live out a broken life alone, vastly preferring to go down to the Yellow Springs hand-in-hand with her man, and feeling quite at liberty to do so, since the children could fend for themselves admirably now, and would have more room and more food without her.

No one had blamed her.

And if Pang Kee and Pang Lee had missed her and grieved for her too, as they both certainly missed and grieved for the father, they had felt, though probably without realizing it, and certainly without ever saying it, that it was not all to the bad to get two years of mourning and all its serious curtailments and inconveniences over in one, make one coffin save the price of another. It had been simple enough to loosen the top of the coffin and lay the wife with her lord, and an honor her devotion merited.

Marriage had brought few rasps and much content to Pang Lee and Pang Kee. If their actual wedlock when he was twenty, and she nearly eighteen—in northern China adult years come more slowly than in the more ripening South—had lacked the lure of novelty that spices the more usual bridals in which a stranger lifts the red bridal veil from the face of a girl he never has seen before, it had been built on a very firm rock of established comradeship and well-tried congeniality; and even to such lifelong friends as these, actual wedlock had a tang, even a novelty and a snug sweetness that not even the everyday mutual familiarity of the years they had shared could blur.

The "rearing marriage" does not always prove so; but luckily for them, theirs did. They were the best of friends. Pang Kee never beat Pang Lee now, and not once had they quarreled since he was thirteen, and after their real wedlock Pang Lee never once spoke sharply or complainingly to his wife.

Neither could read or write, but Lee was quick and sure when he fingered the beads on his abacus. No one could cheat Pang Lee when he tallied up a debt on his counting-board.

Neither gave it a thought that their life was unduly hard. And each had but one dream: his to be rich enough to smoke twice a day—two pipes at sunset where now he drew but one; hers to eat rice.

Neither Pang Lee nor Pang Kee his wife had ever tasted rice. But Pang Kee had had a great craving to, ever since she could remember.

Most of the peasants of Shantung live and die without tasting rice. The very scant rice that grows in the Sacred Province is so inferior—wretched husky brown stuff—that it is scarcely pig-fit, and the imported rice comes from so far, and hence is so costly, that to eat it is to eat silver always, and often is to eat gold. Only the very rich, or the criminally extravagant, can eat rice in Shantung. Millionaires are sparse in Shantung, and criminal extravagance,

or any unjustified extravagance, is almost as rare in China as rice is in Confucius' own Province.

Pang Kee had no dream of avarice. It never entered her head to wish to be rice-rich. To be rice-rich is to be very rich indeed—in Shantung. It is to be able to eat rice every day, or at least not very infrequently, to live in a great house, tended by a multitude of servants, to own great store of land and treasures, so rich that you can make it worth the while of well selected and efficient gods—several sorts of gods—to swing most things your way through your long prosperous life down here and up in On High for always.

Pang Kee had no such extortionate ambition. Her dream was to eat rice once—a modest but not mean bowlful of white, succulent, number-one rice.

A strolling story-teller's tale, when she, a wide-eyed, eager toddler, had squeezed her way through the circle of older listeners to the very edge of his mat, had been quite beyond her baby understanding. But it had mentioned a particularly elegant meal of rice of which a Manchu princess had surreptitiously betaken in company with an ineligible troubadour whom she secretly adored, and whom she contrived to entertain to the sound of slave-girls' guitars and wind-harps asway in the swaying willow trees in a hidden and secret garden of surprising verdure and loveliness on the edge of one of the Vermilion Palace's three hundred and sixty-nine lotus lakes. The thrill of illicit love did not appeal to the peasant baby-girl, nor did the long list that the story-teller so glibly catalogued of imperial Peking splendors; but the high-piled bowl of gleaming, steaming white rice did. And the rice stuck. The baby mouth watered at the thought of rice then—and had watered again and again all Pang Kee's life. A craving for rice—just to eat it once—had become an intermittent obsession of her life—forgotten sometimes, half forgotten often, but never more than lightly dormant, never far below the surface, quick to quiver and rouse at a word or

allusion, until it had become almost a germ of insanity that might have developed into mad mania in one of a race less foreign to insanity than hers was.

Humdrum as their life had been, they had scarcely known it that: the changing seasons gave it variety of background and variety of occupation; they kept all the festivals, and felt no satiety in the sameness of their rough food, and grew as little tired of each other as they did of millet-broth and bean-curd. They had pumpkins in their garden and a lilac tree at their doorstep, often a fish for the skillet, always a branch of blossoms or of fir in the empty blue-and-buff ginger-jar that was the little home's one deliberate ornament—the red-and-black good-luck scroll on one wall was more defense than adornment. Always the Hearth-god up on its shelf had a flower of silk, a tiny red candle, a joss-stick, or at least a red fragment of rag prayer, and the first round sweetmeat at the New Year's Lanterns' Feast. Pang Lee had his dolls, and Pang Kee had her spinning-wheel, and they had each other.

They were poor, but many there were poorer: there was always meal in their pot, and firing to cook it; and they worked their way contentedly, and often they were gay in their simple peasant way.

A year after the older Pang had gone On High a man-child had been born, and the little home had become a temple of warm human love. That first son of theirs had lived a year. Two years after the gods had wrenched him away, again Pang Kee had given birth. And they had welcomed the second boy even more rapturously than they had their first, and tended it with tremulous care. It had lived through six moons. Then Pang Lee had buried it uncoffined under the pumpkin-vines; even that was more funeraling than so young a child could claim as a right.

Six bitter years had come and gone, and want had snarled like a ravened tiger at their door. One autumn the locusts had swarmed the Province, leaving scarcely a grow-

ing thing in pasture or garden-patch; one winter they had eaten half the thatch of their roof, because they could get nothing else to eat. Famine and storm had dogged them. But they kept on, and they clung together. And their patience and mutual kindness had held. A better harvest, a milder winter, patched their want and soothed their fear. Then Lee had sickened and died—died without knowing that again Pang Kee would give him a child. Pang Kee tried to take her life—a poor enough, desolate thing now, the gods knew! But she lacked the courage her mother-in-law had had, and lived on bereft, distraught, alone.

She had buried Pang Lee with all the state she could. The priests had been kind, and chanted and prayed without a fee. The kindly peasant folk of the poor countryside had swelled his cortège, each with some sign of mourning, a head-band of white paper, a garment of old and tattered sacking, a tear-dish of bark; had refused the funeral feast which Pang Kee could not offer. And each that could had brought a flag or a drum. Pang Kee had sold all she had that would sell—garments, table, stools, all the garden held, two brass bowls, a pot of rough painted clay, the hour-glass, her spinning-wheel, Pang Lee's tools and pigments, her hen, the lilac tree, her red wedding-veil, the cradle—everything—and had hired the catafalque and bought a coffin.

A neighbor—her nearest lived four *li* away—had loaned her a widow's robe. And when she came back from the grave some one had left a basket of eggs inside the door, some one a kid's roasted leg, some one a string of fish, some one a flask of oil, and her store of fuel had grown from the floor to the roof, her meal-crock had been refilled.

She lived on, because she had not the courage to die; cursing her own craven cowardice. But when the child leapt, she took heart again, and thanked the gods, because she again was to bear a son, and Pang Lee need not dwell

forever down in the Yellow Springs, but could speed On High on the wings of a son's prayers, when their boy was old enough to worship and sacrifice at the father's grave. That had been the cruel sting of it all—that neither Pang Lee nor she ever could go On High, since heaven is shut to all who have no descendants to worship at their graves. Filial worship is the only "open sesame" at the gate of China's heaven.

Again she would bear her man a son—the rest she could endure. The woman gathered her strength and gripped her will. She worked as she had not worked before—resolute and fixed; worked almost blithely when the child leapt. She kept herself alive, she even contrived the tiny garments that lay there. And again Pang Kee found some sweetness in life, chiefly because of the child that snuggled and stirred at her heart, something because she was she, a sturdy Chinese peasant who, if she lacked her race's traditional courage for self-slaughter, had its finer courage to live and endure, its patience and unconscious indomitability of personal character. If all her life had been cramped, it never had been cluttered. And she had absorbed the vitality of the rugged things she lived with—terrific storms, rocks, great pine trees, rough mountain paths, surging streams—and ancestry and steady, even industry had reenforced it.

The great stove grew warmer and warmer, the little room grew cozy, the outer storm raged and screamed, but could not penetrate, and the woman dozed on, and dreamed—dreamed of days that were gone and never would be hers again but in her dreams, dreamed of her man and the boys she had borne him, dreamed of companions and of table and stools that were gone, dreamed of a steaming white rice-heaped bowl on the table; slept and dreamed with the poultice of heat on the shuddering sore of pain.

She woke with a scream of agony. Her trial was ripe, and it fell.

And the widow's hut was a seething caldron of pain.

CHAPTER II

ZUT QU cackled unctuously as she bent over the greasy cards, shifting and shuffling them in her scrawny old hands, studying them by the light of the resined fire on her cave's stone floor. Zut Qu the witch-woman lived in the mountain's stone side, and neither heat nor cold, storm nor want, ever touched her. The cave that some old earthquake had cut in the granite, and that centuries had smoothed to marble sleekness, was cool when the outer world staggered and swooned in the heat of the hottest eighth moon that cooked and burnt and slaughtered; and in the iciest twelfth moon the cave brimmed with comfort and warmth—for Zut Qu's store of fuel never was low; and always her rice-rich store of food and drink was more than she could use. The old crone fared rich, and lay soft. When she commanded, the people brought, for greatly they feared her—feared even more than they hated. She was three hundred years old, the peasants said; and the rumor was truer than peasants' gossip often is: Zut Qu had spanned her century a moon ago.

The scream and bellow of the storm scarcely reached her as she squatted playing her interminable game of patience. She loved her cards, she loved her meat and drink, and her pipe, and she greatly loved the rage of winter hurricanes. It was almost a pity she could not hear more plainly the wind as it tore and shrieked across the mountain, bending the pine trees, uprooting the wild azaleas, tossing fragments of rock about like thistledowns.

She feared nothing, neither devils nor gods nor men nor beasts, nor hurricane—not even death; for Zut Qu was as superstitious as the peasants whose credulity and superstition fed her fat, fanned her in summer, heaped her with furs in winter, and she believed that she never would die.

An oddly successful vampire and charlatan even in a

place where simple souls' simple honesty makes nefarious necromancy a wealth when every other human industry goes hungry and in rags—or, worse, goes naked and starves! And success had made her vain; she believed that the Mountain-dragon himself held her his equal, that the King-of-the-locusts was her friend, and that neither her life nor her appetite ever would dwindle, much less end.

She knew how all the peasant people hated and avoided her (and not a few others who should have known better than to gaze and fear as "the sillies" did), but she cared not a jot that they did; she valued fear, and she did not value love, and she craved no companionship but her own and the good things that never failed: wine, meat, spice, cards, green Yün-nan tobacco, water-pipe, fuel, power.

To do her the one justice she deserved, she had no hate of them that hated her. She despised them, but she did not hate, neither disliked nor liked them.

She guzzled and smoked and played with her cards, and she paid her debts; for extortionate usury is just payment of folly and imbecile credulity. But it need not be held to her a virtue that she paid her debts in a land where every debtor pays, the country and nation of five races who all are honest. She exacted great tribute, but she gave her clients what they craved in exchange: love-potions, luck-charms, warnings of danger, glittering promises, craven quakes, jibbering fear, many thrills.

She looked even older than her many years, but her shrunken, twisted body kept incredibly strong, supple and well. And sometimes the peasants saw her dancing on some high perilous crag in the pulsing silver moonlight—dancing clad in flowered silks and gleaming beads sometimes, sometimes dancing stark naked, only her white hair tumbled about her scrawny shoulders for raiment. When she danced they watched from a distance, if they chanced to see her, but never drew near. They made her obeisance if she passed them on path or street, but none ever ventured the entrance of her den except when three fir boughs over

its opening beckoned them in—nor even then more than a pace, unless when they struck on the gong just inside the tortuous entrance—struck twice with the ox-leg bone mallet—her shrill voice croaked out permission.

No one took liberties with Zut Qu the witch, and no one in living man's memory ever had—except a tiny girl-child years ago—a child who never had told that she had; and Zut Qu never had told.

No magic can be wrought in the presence of women, cats or hens. That is why an old cat on a chain can keep luck in and devils out of a homestead even more surely than the gods painted on the house door can.

The *wo-gên*—the wizards who live in mountain caves—know all things, never die and all are men. In rule-ridden China few rules have an exception. This made Zut Qu's wizardry and power all the more remarkable, and because so remarkable all the more enormous and unchallenged.

There were no chinks in her armor. The human creature who fears nothing and loves no one is invulnerable indeed. Her body had never felt pain, nor—since she could remember, if ever—known want. When or where or of whom she had been born, she herself had no idea. The peasants told that the Mountain-dragon his own evil self had been her father, a terrible lava-and-flame-vomiting earthquake her mother, suckling her on fire, feeding her with burning ashes for pap. The peasants believed it, and she half believed it was true.

She never had loved—or did not remember it—except the creature comforts her appetites craved and claimed and found; and she never had hated.

Only once she had felt a human emotion: merely a surprised amusement, edged with a something softer she had not suspected then nor since. But that one emotion, small as it was, had given her an almost human spot, the one vulnerable spot which every human creature has, and every animal.

A tiny girl had walked into her cave one day—long

ago—without by-your-leave, and when old Zut Qu had raised her stick and her voice, and cursed the child and bade it be gone, the baby thing had laughed and toddled nearer, seated itself serenely on the soft fur rug, cuddled itself confidently against the old crone's knee, and then proceeded to play with the long string of amber and cornelian beads that the wizard-one chanced to be wearing about her scrawny neck. Zut Qu was surprised, and then amused. And the weird old cave-woman felt what she never had felt before —respect.

It was absurd to honor for fearlessness what was nothing more metaled than infant ignorance; but Zut Qu had lived apart too long to have any sane estimate of human values. To her men and women were nothing but dupes. The clients who crept to her cave to crave her charms and aid, and pay for them heavily, never brought their children with them; and to the wizard such children as she'd seen when she went very rarely below her mountain fastness were puling no-ones, or negligible mites who had as little use for her as she for them. Usually they had scuttled away at her approach.

Here was one who had sought her, and feared her not! Zut Qu respected the first unawed face that she remembered ever having seen lifted to hers; eyes that looked into hers with equal fearlessness when she scowled or grinned. And the woman saw that the tender little face was very lovely, and in spite of the hard old heart the hard old eyes kindled at that. For Zut Qu the cave-woman was Chinese, and could not look upon beauty quite unmoved.

Little Pang Kee had fared sumptuously for an hour. She had eaten of fowl, and tasted sacred yellow wine. And when the sinewy old arms that had carried her down the steep mountain path—that was scarcely a path, and that the tiny feet, for all their inborn peasant strength, had almost miraculously managed to climb—had put her down, and Pang Kee had toddled back to where Pang Lee, the lazy one, still slept under the willow trees, she had a cloth-

ful of sweetmeats clutched in one hand and a great dried bat in the other.

The sweetmeats had been proffered and accepted, the defunct bat had been demanded and yielded. Pang Lee woke up and shared the sweetmeats, too absorbed in their excellence to be curious. Indeed, he had eaten most of them, for Pang Kee had been too replete with chicken and pickled bamboo tips to have much stomach-room or welcome for glazed almonds or spiced rose petals or nougat and silvered chocolate and gilded cocoanut flakes. And Pang Kee had dropped the preserved bat and forgotten it, and so her escapade was never suspected by her mother-in-law.

Pang Kee never went back to the cave, and did not see Zut Qu again for years, and forgot. But the wizard-one remembered, and sometimes she saw the child and watched her. And Pang Kee was uncannily lucky in finding desirable trifles in all sorts of unexpected places—a tiny perfumed russet melon, sweetmeats, a bit of unsoiled silk, a string of coral, once a stickpin, twice a silver coin, tit-bits of food, trifles of ornaments and of toys.

But the crone's body began at last to sag with the lengthening of her years—and she climbed up and down the steep mountainside more and more slowly, more and more rarely.

But she did see Pang Kee once and again, spoke to her even. And the growing girl, and then the woman, showed no more fear of her than the baby intruder had in the cave. And a certain friendliness came between them. Pang Kee never went to the den in the mountain again, never sought the wizard for charm, potion or advice; but she always had a smile and a friendly enough word for the old-one—partly reverence for age, partly good-natured liking and acceptance of every one and of most things. And once she had pulled the old-one in from a sudden rain-squall, and given her tea and toasted persimmons.

Most of what the widow had found in her beggared hut when she came back from Pang Lee's grave, peasant folk almost as poor as she had put there; but an old witch-

woman, who walked painfully now, bent to her stick's crook, had put the basket of eggs and the oil. And only a tax-gatherer and a witch-woman knew why the tax-gatherer never once darkened the doorway of Pang Lee's widow's hut.

It was daybreak, and the storm had beaten itself into harmless tatters, when Zut Qu had finished her "solitaire," and rose creakingly, and looked out at the dampened sunrise.

It was terribly cold. The storm's havoc of broken branches and uprooted saplings was ice-filmed thickly. The wind had died, but the sun looked cold, and the world was sheeted in snow. The old-one shivered a little as she drew back into the heat of her cave.

But presently something, that must have been alive, for it moved so, but looked but a grotesque hill-shaped bundle of fur-lined quilts, carrying a brass brazier of burning charcoal, came out from the cave, and made its lumbering, stick-steadied way very cautiously and slowly down the snow-blanketed mountain path.

CHAPTER III

LIMP from pain that had gone, but left its memory behind it, a rack to torture her still, weak from months of want and of grief, Pang Kee lay on the *k'ang* quivering and faint, too spent to rise or move, too spent to more than pull somehow her child up into her trembling arms and nest it there with her in the disordered quilts on the cooling stove.

It was day, she saw from the shaft of yellow light that blurred in through the window's one paper pane and lay a yellow pool on the mud floor. She held her boy close and blessed him, all new-born and untended as he was, pressed him a little closer when he whimpered; she could do no more.

The storm had passed; she saw that, too, or else the sun would not have mirrored itself even faintly there on the ground; and the silence told her so, too—there was not a sound, except the cry of the child, and the soft crackling of last slow-burning twigs. If no one came, and succored, they would freeze to death when the last warmth of the *k'ang* had gone, and they would starve unless food came. Some one might come. The child would need no breast for a day or more, she herself often had fasted of late, and even when its last fuel had turned to cooling ash the great earthen *k'ang* would hold its warmth for hours. And Pang Kee thought that the sun, too, was warming the room even now, and it would be hotter at the hour of noon. The walls were thick; they kept cold out and they kept heat in. She would not die; her child should live—the son whose worship would prove the purchase price of Pang Lee's entrance into the bliss of On High. Presently she would rise, and find a way. Pang Lee's son should not die. She would rest a little longer, to gather back strength so; and then she'd get up and do—find a way to fend for her son and his mother.

The thirst was the worst. But she would reach the kettle presently and drink. There was snow outside, and great icicles hanging from the roof's upcurled lips; snow and icicles she could melt and drink when kettle and water-barrel were empty; no need to die of thirst with tons of water safely cellared in snow and ice at her very door.

She closed her throbbing eyes, partly to shut out the light, though the gods knew it was welcome after the storm-shrouded night's black darkness, partly to shut out the sight of the great lump of salt that whetted and rasped her thirst—closed her eyes and waited. She could have slept again now, leaving her torn and wearied body in "sore labor's bath," but she would not sleep, lest some footfall pass by her door unheard; and, too, the new companionship snuggled there in her arm was too sweet to relinquish its ecstasy yet in the thievish oblivion of sleep.

An hour passed, and then another. They lay very still, under their quilts, the mother planning, scheming already for him, and listening for any outer human sound; and the child slept and was snug.

Some one was coming! She had feared that no one might pass for days; often it was so, for the broken footway of stones and moss on which the tiny home stood was no high-road—neither cart nor one-wheeled barrow could thread it without back-breaking difficulty. But some one was coming. Pang Kee held her breath—not to waste it by calling too soon, perhaps too feeble to call twice. Who passed must hear her when she called out to them. She lay very still, waited, holding her breath; quiveringly anxious not to call out too soon, nor to call out too late.

She heard the pad-pad of thick-cloth-clad feet crunching the snow on and between the ice-slippery stones, she heard a wheel, a metal-rimmed wheel that sizzed in the sharp rime of the crusted snow. A barrow-man was passing, was almost abreast of the door now; now she must hail him, and make him hear her. It would be difficult, probably impossible, to induce him to turn back towards the Village of the Long-nosed Chos, and half-way there ask Lun Nin to come to her. For she had nothing with which to pay him for the toil and delay of turning back on his way. And from the wearing, grunting noise the barrow made, she knew that it was heavily laden. But in charity he'd give her a drink, she was sure—if only she made him hear her—fill the gourd dipper, and when she had drunk fill it again and leave it where she could reach it, and then when he reached the village of the Two-headed Cow—he must be going there—beg Tee Bing to come to her. Lun Nin would have come; she wished the barrow-man had been going the other way. She was not so sure of Tee Bing: Tee Bing could be surly at times, and, too, always had chilblains in the Pepper-month. And Lun Nin lived the nearer.

However, no one could expect a barrow-man to alter

his way or delay in such cold as this. He would give her a drink, she was sure. And she would implore him to send some woman to her for an hour, if only she managed to make him hear her. Perhaps even he'd spare her a pinch of meal or a twist of dried tea-dust when he knew her the mother of a just-come-to-earth man-one. Strangers could be very kind—and often the poorest were kindest.

Now she must call!—or lose her chance that was not like to come soon again. "When the gods give, take—or expect not their bounty again."

But Pang Kee did not call.

The barrow had stopped. A slow step dragged to the door. The latch was lifted.

She did not know the witch-woman all swathed and swaddled in cloth and fur to her eyelids, but she knew it for a woman, and cried out a jerked, panting welcome.

The bundle of coats shut the door sharply, let a crooked stick and a mat basket fall to the ground with a thud, and waddled a step nearer, wriggled wearily out of most of its thick swathings, and Pang Kee saw Zut Qu, knew Zut Qu, and hailed and blessed her.

"What's doing here?" the old-one demanded roughly, but her wheezing voice did not sound unkind, and Pang Kee saw no menace in the sharp, flint-hard eyes that shot over the room and its holdings like sure-aimed gun-shot pellets.

"A man is born!" Pang Kee answered proudly.

The ancient woman cackled in toothless congratulation —then added, "And none to help you?"

"None to help us—but it has passed."

"When did you eat?"

"Yesterday," Pang Kee said.

"Much?" the old woman grunted sharply.

"Not much, O wise-one."

"What?"

"Twigs—by the wayside."

"Frozen, sapless twigs by the wayside!"

"I was glad to chew them, old-one."

Zut Qu waggled her head grimly.

"But now I thirst," Pang Kee told her. "Will give me the dipper?"

Zut Qu only half filled it, then laced the warmish water from a flask she took from her basket, before she held the handled half-gourd to Pang Kee's lips, lifting Pang Kee's head not ungently with one palsied claw. When she had taken the emptied dipper away, she peered into the *k'ang*, but she did not look into the crock on the food-shelf; no need to look into the meal-crock of one who had been glad to chew twigs in the Pepper-month. She pushed her own hand-brazier nearer to Pang Kee, went again to the door and opened it a narrow slit, and spoke. Pang Kee did not catch what the old-one said, but she heard obedience in the grunt that was the reply, and as Zut Qu reclosed the door she heard the barrow squeak and crunch off again. She was grateful for that; it meant that the old-one was going to stay with her for a time.

Zut Qu busied herself from her basket at the *k'ang*. It was not quickly done what she did, for her bones were stiff and the fire was low now. But even to lie there and watch food being readied fed the famished, weakened woman.

"You have not seen him," Pang Kee complained gently when the old-one sat down on the side of the quilt-covered *k'ang*-bed, to wait till her stew was done. Pang Kee pulled the quilt aside, and Zut Qu looked—then suddenly hastily re-covered the little raw body and turned away to her cookery—which she had no need to see to yet. A something like pity showed in the wrinkled face that bent low over the pot. And Zut Qu had not met Pang Kee's eyes as she'd covered the babe.

It was good, the food she presently brought and fed; and the half-starved woman ate and ate, storing her stomach against to-morrow's famine. Perhaps the old-one read it so, for she said, "Thou shalt not hunger again, O

mother-one. I cannot come often down from my cave. The way is long, the way is cold and steep, and my bones ache and rebel in the Pepper-month. But I will send to thy need. Thou need have no fear. Want shall not gnaw or snarl at thy door again. I will send, and I have a way to make those I send obey; what I send will reach thee. Now sleep while I watch, sleep till the wheelbarrow comes back."

"And then thou must go?" Pang Kee spoke a little sadly. She had not feared being alone, had not often troubled to drop the inner bar across the hut door when she had been but one; for none would come to steal where all knew there was nothing to find or take. How much less could she feel alone, or fear to be so, now that she was two, no longer a miseried widow thing, but a mother triumphant who had borne her lord, and who held a man. Not even a brigand would harm a babe or the mother at whose breast he pulled, even if in all the Province there were a brigand so small-livered as not to scorn and pass by such penury as hers. The house-doors of the rice-rich must be powerfully guarded, their teeming gardens and fields strongly walled; but such huts as hers are rarely locked, even at night; never barricaded. A cat to have kept ill-luck out she often had wished for, but she would not keep or chain a cat she could not feed.

But she shrank from loneliness—she who had been so bitterly steeped in loneliness since her man had died.

"I stay to-night with you," Zut Qu replied, "to-morrow perhaps—but I stay to-night."

"Where will you lie?" Pang Kee questioned anxiously.

"My furs are soft and warm. Now sleep you."

But Pang Kee would not sleep. A woman's companionship was too rare and spiced a pleasure—even an old, old woman whom all the country-folk feared for a witch. Pang Kee did not care whether the old-one were witch or no; for she knew she was kind. In her son she had all

that life left her to wish; but he could not hear what she said—not yet—and Pang Kee burned to talk.

And she talked. She laughed, and babbled happily on about her son; how she would work for him, how she would rear him, what he should do, what he should be. And Zut Qu listened silently, with averted eyes, and gathered lips.

"Will you help me to dress him?" the mother begged, at last. "See, there is the little red coat, the belly-prop and the tuck-up cloth."

"Presently," the other replied; "there is time enough."

Pang Kee did not think so. But even the mother of a man-one could not dispute with one so venerable as the cave-witch, or unmannerly over-urge one who had come so far to do her kindness and had done it so kindly and bountifully. But it hurt her to wait. It was disrespectful, she felt, to let the new-one lie there so long, untended, couched unclad on her arm, with only the top tip of black-downed yellow head peeping out of the old padded quilt. She wanted to see her baby's toilet made, longed to see him spruce and arrayed in the tiny red coat and the else she had prepared.

The afternoon sun was low when they heard the barrow creaking back across the stones and frozen snow.

But when Pang Kee saw what a store of wood the man had brought, a stack of timber and charcoal, the size of a small house's bulk, heaped and well packed on the wheelbarrow and strapped on his own broad, sturdy back, and saw the fire the woman made in the smoldering stove—saw and felt—she understood that Zut Qu had been wiser than she, had waited for the hut to be better warmed before exposing the tender one to its air. And Pang Kee waited patiently and gratefully till the other should say, "Now—it is warm enough; we will robe the very honorable man-one."

But the old woman did not say it yet; not until she had

brewed tea, delicate, fragrant tea such as rarely is brewed in a peasant's hut, and had made Pang Kee drain twice a scalding basinful, and eat a fritter of fish and corn, and had given her a lump of ginger to nibble and suck.

Then she said, and the hard old face looked oddly tender, "You are brave, O Pang Kee. It is that that has made me your friend."

The other murmured some words of hurried thanks, then, unable to hold it longer, she asked again, "Shall we robe him now, O old-one?"

"You have been brave for years, woman-brave and man-brave, as a widowed one who has neither kindred nor coins has need to be. But now you have need to be braver than ever you have been, Pang Kee."

"Let me dress my baby." She scarcely had heard Zut Qu—and the little she had heard she had not heeded.

"There is no need," Zut Qu told her briefly.

Pang Kee heard that! No need to order and clothe the son she had borne Pang Lee! "Now, before it grows darker," she said firmly, sitting up in the quilts. She would rise and do it herself now, if the venerable put it off longer.

"There is no need," Zut Qu repeated, but her voice softened oddly. "For, O widow-one, it is a girl-child there in the quilts."

Pang Kee stared numbly at Zut Qu. She could not understand. Less could she believe. Her son was her son: her man-one. Never once had she wondered whether the child would be a boy or a girl. That gnawing anxiety had been spared her in her long moons of waiting and want and grinding toil, and in her hours of sore travail. She had known from the first that it was a son she wore on her heart. She knew that it was a son that lay there in the crook of her arm under the quilt: a son to staff her years, to worship his father. The old-one was silly! But the old-one had been very kind—kind with such kindness as may not be paid with grudging thanks or a frowning face.

Age *sometimes,* Pang Kee knew, was very silly, but age *always* was sacred. Next to the gods themselves—not the bazaar-bought gods of clay and wood, but the great gods On High—old age was to be worshiped, obeyed and served, even when age doddered and dribbled. Pang Kee gazed at Zut Qu blankly, with dazed, unreading eyes, and smiled faintly and meekly at the old woman's pitying face.

But the old eyes that met hers were steady and strong; and presently the younger eyes flinched a little, and a glint of terror lurked in them, and the smile on Pang Kee's lips grew stiff, and its meekness was hardened away.

"It is only a girl," the cave-woman repeatedly harshly. But the skin-covered claws in her sleeves trembled on their scrawny, fleshless old arms.

Pang Kee's face was a stone.

Slowly she drew back the quilt—and looked.

Then she turned away, face down on her draggled quilts; stiff and cold in the hot-heated room; stricken, hopeless now; torn and sick with a sharper, more cruel pain than childbirth can deal.

Zut Qu left her so, for a time—the woman who had lost all, and the woman who had forgotten all that ever her womanhood had known or felt; dead hearts; womanhood defeated, wifehood spoiled, and womanhood that had perished many years ago. And the child slept on.

"Bear it, O Pang Kee," the older said at last. "You must. I will take it away—out to the glutch across the road. 'Twill take me but a moment. And then do you forget; it is all you can. And you shall want not for heat or drink or meal until you are strong. And you will have but your own mouth to feed. I will take it now and cover it well with the snow; it will not wake."

It was best, of course. A son might have grown to manhood and strength, might have begotten sons of his own, and his sons sons; to keep up the endless chain of worship at the graves, which was all that could anchor Pang Lee and his wife Pang Kee to the flower-covered rock

of blissful On High. But a girl to be steeped in want and toil all her days, a girl whom none would wed because not a *cash* of dower was hers, and she the child of those who lay in unworshiped graves, and whose souls must toss and shriek down in the underworld forever; a girl whom she could neither feed nor robe nor spare even one of ignominious poverty's myriad pangs. Of course, it was best. Who wanted a girl? Pang Lee's widow did not. The witch-one was kind.

She made no sign or sound to stay Zut Qu, but turned again and watched the old-one quietly as Qu muffled herself again in cloth and furs, took up her stick, limped back to the *k'ang,* bent stiffly down and lifted the little naked child—not ungently. Pang Kee watched stolidly, and gave no sign. Her eyes were dull and hard—harder than the woman's who bent down to lift the child.

But as Zut Qu turned away—"I'll look," Pang Kee spoke coldly, and bent over the tiny face she hated with bitter venom in her own. And her face neither softened nor changed as she took her long look—the first she really had taken—at the soft little bunch of crinkled peach-colored flesh that was her baby's face. She thrust it back sourly towards Zut Qu, who had not lifted it again, and pushed at them both with a repellent gesture that bade them go—both go, and the child not come back.

As the old-one lifted the morsel again, the tiny pink mouth-scrap opened, and yawned. Then suddenly as the woman moved the baby wailed—a little whimpered cry of discontent.

A cry answered its cry—a cry that lashed through the room like a whipcord of sudden December storm. It was not a cry of pain, the mother's cry that answered her babe's; it was proclamation, claim, defiance, love. And the old-wise-one knew it final even before Pang Kee snatched her baby passionately back to hold it close and soothe it against her face.

"I will keep the little daughter-one," Pang Kee said

softly, firmly. "She is mine. We will find a way to take care of each other, the little red flower and I."

"So." It was all old Zut Qu said. She did not approve; she could not approve. But her old metal answered and keyed with the mother-metal of Pang Kee. The mother's clarion cry smote and woke an old forgotten chord in the hag's shriveled breast, a chord that answered and tuned. And with no other comment, no argument, she turned away, dropped her stick, threw off her fur-lined coat, brought warmed water, soft rag, a flask of oil from her basket, the little red coat, the tuck-rag, the belly-prop, and laid them ready.

The sunset jeweled the poor bare peasant room with amber and rose and gold. In its brazen Eastern splendor, the multiplied splendor of Chinese sunset after storm, crashing in through the thick paper pane of the high-up, foot-square window, it lay in pools of lovely fire on the dull mud floor, bathing the new little body as tenderly as the women did before they swathed it in tuck-up-cloth, belly-prop and proud red coat.

It may not have been an "exquisite flower," the queer little lump of new-born flesh that squirmed, and that bleated aloud once at water's rag-rubbed offense, and yawned, and that opened two indignant eye-slits and wriggled a questioning nose at the oil's thick smell, but it was undeniably red, the ten-hour-old, undeniably red even before they put on its red birth-coat.

Baby's first toilet complete, the old wizened witch tended the mother, more gently, more skilfully than hand so palsied, old, unaccustomed and claw-like could have been looked to do.

As the sunset faded, and all was dark and black, Zut Qu lay down on her outspread furs. But Pang Kee crooned to her baby, and forgot as she touched its soft face with proud, fondling fingers that she was a sonless widow, friendless, poor and pain-torn.

CHAPTER IV

IN the hour-of-the-monkey the next afternoon the wheelbarrow man came back for Zut Qu, as she had charged him to do. And when she and her bundling furs were stacked and packed into one side of the barrow, Pang Kee stood at the hut door and watched them go.

It was not for Pang Kee to keep the days of "after-childbirth-lying-in" that Chinese motherhood is enjoined. Even in China abject poverty is stronger than etiquette, stronger even than custom itself; even in China necessity is stronger than law. The *k'ang* must be tended, or the fire would go out; and no one could live for a day and a night in a fireless room in the Pepper-month. Even the furred beasts froze in their lairs at times, and wild geese, chilled on the wing, fell frozen to the ground. Whatever the mother laws commanded, the *k'ang* must be tended and mended, if she or the child were to live.

To-day she need not go abroad in search of fuel, food or employment. Zut Qu had left food and fuel, and had promised to send more. But soon the mother must toil and search abroad, as she had until two days ago. Zut Qu had said they should not want again—but Pang Kee had not taken that for a license to sloth or ease; and even if the old-one gave again and still again, Pang Kee wished to gather and garner all that she could. Even the strangely generous old cave-witch would not give her half she wanted for Red Flower—and she wished to work and win for the child herself. Work would be sweet that she did for Flower.

Already Pang Kee planned all that her daughter-one should have: a robe of silk for festival days, a lacquered lute and a silver flute and skill to play them, fine embroideries to wear, fine embroidery and skill to stitch it, stickpins, jade buttons, soft fare, a fan to fan when they went to the temple, gentle, instructed speech, unroughened hands with

long twisted nails on every finger, strings of scented, jingling beads and binded feet. Not all at once—that was impossible—but little by little, a slow accrument of Pang Kee's unflagging toil.

She stood at the door and watched them go, shading her eyes with her hand, for the sunset's splendor athwart the snow was blinding.

The wheelbarrow man had a sorry task. A heavily loaded barrow that is evenly loaded takes some pushing and straining—only a Chinese coolie could move it at all, and only a Chinese would—and gives some sweating; a barrow loaded on only one side is ten burly devils and a mountain of lead to push; and the way back to the old-one's mountain was uphill, and the twisted path, rough even in summer, now was glassed with ice and riddled with holes and ruts.

Used as a Chinese peasant woman is to the sight of such punishing toil, Pang Kee had a feeling of some sympathy for the man who pushed between the wheelbarrow handles, bending almost double as he strained at the heavy, cumbersome thing that groaned and creaked ominously but scarcely moved, and because of its one-sided load threatened to turn turtle into the stones and snow at each reluctant, sulky revolution of its rusty, clumsy wheel.

Zut Qu would not come again, she felt sure. Kwan Yin had sent the venerable one to her the once to succor her in her extremity and peril. But it was not reasonable to hope that the wise-one ever would come again: the way was too long, too cold and too rough. And rarely did the cave-dweller ever leave her hole in the mountain by even a foot. But Zut Qu had said that she would send. And when the warm moons came Pang Kee would carry her honorable Red Flower in her arms and crave admittance to the cave. She would not forget Zut Qu or the charity and help she had given.

Pang Kee turned back into the hut, and closed its door on the bitter cold; the fragrant flower-one must be kept warm.

Under her furs Zut Qu's bones rattled and ached as the wheelbarrow jolted and squeaked its sore, slow way through the frost-bitten sunset. The barrow-man's breath came in harder and harder pants, and the sweat that dripped from his face froze on his corded neck. If the way seemed long and hard to him, it seemed longer, more sore to old Zut Qu. She wished she had started sooner, while the warmth of the sun still a little tempered the air. Why had she lingered so long? What had moved her to go there at all? Why had she aided the silly-one to save the life of a girl, who would be but an added burden to the widow-one whose lot was burden enough? There had been a reason, but she could not remember what. Had she known it at the time, there in the hut when she'd been so weak?

She had not remembered or understood then, even as she did not now. But she had *felt,* and had acted not from impulse or whim, when she had acquiesced in the silly-one's foolish wish to keep the child and to let it live, but from a tenderness for a day that she could not even recall to her time-blurred mind; a day as cold as this when she, almost a child, a frightened, thwarted number-two wife, had stolen away from the husband's home, stealing with her her new-born child—a girl—whom its father and his number-one had decreed must die; they had more girls already than they cared to dower; it was sons they lacked and craved; it was to bear them sons that the number-two had been taken. Quick-witted even then, nimble of unbound feet as of sharp young head, the little number-two had made good her escape. Perhaps they had not sought her far, had not greatly cared. She had not been found, or taken back. When night was falling and her limbs incapable of another *li,* an old peasant and his old wife had taken her into their hut, and had given her welcome, shared with her food and warmth, and had asked her no question. But when they loosened her coat—her fingers had been too cramped and stiffened to do it themselves—the babe that it sheltered was dead—frozen in the long cold flight, or

smothered by its child-mother's anxious care. The old man had buried the little body, uncoffined, under his garden's tree, a nicety of disposal that a baby-body did not often get. And they had kept the frenzied mother as long as she would stay. She had never gone back. When the spring uncurled the willow's first tender leaves she had gone on—on to a far village, where again she had found shelter and work. From place to place she had gone, sometimes staying a day, staying in some a moon, in some a year.

All this the old mind, in the old bundle of bones and skin and furs, jostled there in the creaking, creeping wheelbarrow, had forgotten quite. The tale of her long years, her years of wandering, and the many, many years she had lived and plied her canny trade in the cave she had chanced to find and took for her own, was long to tell or to hear. But the kindness two old peasants had given, though she no longer remembered it, or that she too had been a mother once, had stayed in some hidden fold of the old witch-soul; and to-day and yesterday Zut Qu had paid a debt; rewomaned, rehumaned again by the plight of a lonely, coinless woman who had clung to the girl-babe she had borne.

Zut Qu was heavy on her stick as she entered her cave. She fumbled for a flint, to strike a light—she lived in luxury in her mountain den—that she might urge a fire and warm a dish of wine; fumbled, and fell in a senseless heap of furs on the fur that carpeted her den—and slept; still slept huddled so when out above the mountain the sun rushed into the day and broke the white of the rimed snow with dapples of rose and gold.

CHAPTER V

WHEN dark came, it stayed, in Pang Kee's one-roomed hut. Even while Pang Lee had lived they rarely had afforded the cost of a wick burning in a dish of oil. From

dawn's first glimmer to dark they had toiled, scarcely pausing to eat such scant rough fare as they had, and in summer they had toiled too by moonlight; but even a Chinese peasant must rest sometimes, and they took their rest when neither the Day-star nor the night's Great Lantern served them for light.

When she had closed the door after Zut Qu had gone, Pang Kee had nothing to do. The housewifery of one small bare room is not much, and such as there was here, all had been done between them before the old beneficent-one had gone. Pang Kee could neither take the soft, wee new-one into the outer-cold while she herself searched the snow-hidden waysides for twigs and dung and storm-torn branches, nor leave the wee-one alone in the hut—or so she thought in the obsession of motherhood. So she sat down on the edge of the *k'ang* and watched her sleeping daughter. It was occupation enough. And even after an hour it did not pall. Utter idleness has more excitement than monotony to the hard-working Chinese peasants to whom it so rarely comes, from toddling babyhood to coffin-time. Pang Kee scarcely could remember when before she had done nothing but sit and rest for most of a daylight hour.

To-morrow she would find some form of industriousness that would not take her beyond the sound of her baby, if it cried; would add something to their store, if only a few wind-thrown stalks or branches on the wayside. There was food enough for several days now, the snow would give her all the water they needed, even if the well were frozen over or too far to seek. The barrow-load of fuel would keep the stove fed for a long time. But she'd begin gathering fuel to-morrow. She must not let their store get too low; the *k'ang* must not go out even once until the first buds showed pink on the almond trees—not with the new-one homed in the hut.

Pang Kee knew that there was a coin in the food-basket that Zut Qu had left for them; Zut Qu had said so. But a coin is not elastic, and it is to be parted with or broken

into only in absolute necessity, not alone because to hold on to it was to hold on to security—no one was quite friendless who had a coin—but the poorest peasants in such districts as this have so few ever, and so often have none, that to them a piece of silver takes on a sort of exalted personality. One hates to part with it, almost from a kind of social reason, almost too a spiritual reason. Pang Kee would not spend the coin Zut Qu had left her, until she had to spend it. So long as she had it safe here in the hut, it seemed almost an initial nest-egg towards fragrant Red Flower's dowry. Pang Kee assuredly must work to-morrow—but not until to-morrow.

And had she been as minded to spend, as she firmly was minded not to spend, to spend was not easy. It meant a long tramp to and fro to the nearest large village. Few pedlers passed by her hut—none in the Pepper-month. No one sold fuel, nearer than the far-off city; every one gathered it. The barrow-man who had done Zut Qu's bidding must have bought a share of their own store from some well-supplied home or farm. Pang Kee would not buy; she would find. In Shantung such peasants as she literally grow or gather their living from their own garden-patch and from the unclaimed, unguarded places about it, where all are free to hunt and carry.

She wanted no more food to-day. Until the black of night had fallen she sat motionless on the quilt-padded stove, and watched the little red, black-downed head that just showed from under the quilt. Then she made the fire right for the night, barred the door—since the wealth of a coin was here—and crept on beside her daughter.

At daybreak Pang Kee came back to the workaday world, took up her life of care and of toil. She ate, and fed her nursling; and when it slept again Pang Kee stacked the stove, then counted their new wealth: tea, dried lentils, meal, ginger, a bit of fresh fish, a dried fish, persimmons, a basin of chopped meat, succulent roots, oil, the wine flask

was half-full still, a box tight-packed with melon-seeds and peanut meats—a basket of splendid plenty.

And the promised coin was there indeed! Not one, but a small purseful, silver—no copper, not a shell—and one gold-piece! Pang Kee never had had, and rarely had seen, so much money at once before, and she never before had owned a coin of gold. Pang Lee never had had a gold-piece. Her eyes filled with tears, and her heart throbbed. Her heart swelled to Zut Qu.

What to do with her purse of wealth was the most important and urgent task before her; not how to spend it, how to lay it out, but how to secure it, where and how to hide it. The hut door had no outer fastening. It had seemed too poor a place to need one.

What the total was of the coins in the purse—a little wallet of skin—Pang Kee had but little idea, and no way of finding out; she knew so little about actual monies, and so little knew how to count. Pang Lee might have managed the sum on the make-tell, the abacus board, but Pang Kee thought not, thought that the problem's mathematical intricacies must have been beyond even him. A piece of gold, of whose value she knew nothing, and differing pieces of silver, many of which she never had seen before, seemed to her a problem of stupendous difficulty. To her the counting-frame was of no use at all. She had kept it, and had kept it on the wall, because Pang Lee had used it so often, because she neither could sell, barter nor burn it, and because it made a small splash of ornament on the dull drab of the mud wall; but she no more could use it than she could have reconstructed the skeleton of a camel from its dismembered and calcinated bones. She must put her treasure—*their* treasure—away without knowing even remotely how much it was. But, even, she reflected with patient Chinese peasant philosophy, if she had known how much it was, how much it was in *yuan* and *cash*, that would not have told her what it represented in cloth and food. Pounds *mean* little to one who has handled only

farthings and pennies and an occasional three-penny bit.

Pang Kee dug a deep hole under the edge of the *k'ang*—a difficult thing to do with her own nails and the edge of the salt drip-pan her only tools—dropped the wallet, its coins in it again, into the hole, refilled the hole, and rested a while. It had taken her hours. She had made the place look as nearly undisturbed as she could, but knowing it there and what it hid, she was far from satisfied with its appearance. Until the place looked—even to her exigent eyes—just as it had, she would not go farther away from the hut than from where she could see the door clearly, and get back to it quickly. That circumscribed her searching for twigs and roots badly. Pang Kee was greatly glad that Zut Qu's basket had held so much food, and that so much of it remained uneaten.

Fragrant Red Flower demanded food; and got it.

Then Pang Kee opened the door, and peered out cautiously. No one was in sight; the cold day was clear, and she knew that her eyes were sharp. She shuffled into her coats, and ventured a few feet from the hut, closing its door behind her, to shut in and save the room's warmth. She had left the child asleep in their quilts.

Pang Kee worked hard until sunset, leaving her toil, and the terrible outer cold, only twice: to warm herself and her stiffened limbs by the stove, to refresh and stimulate herself with long drinks and many sips of almost boiling water, and to feed the child—already greedy and lusty in its cries for the breast.

But for that, the woman toiled until sunset—always within sight of the door behind which the babe slept and the wallet of coins was hid. She burrowed deep in the snow, until her hands and arms were so cold and cramp-stiffened that she no longer could use them so. She searched every surface inch of the ground within eye-range of the hut door. She did not find much, but she found. It is a barren place indeed in which Chinese industry spurred by Chinese need can find nothing.

She found a few twigs, one storm-thrown limb of scrub-oak, a long, rather thick limb, and she found a huge frozen rat, a fat, portly rat. That was all, but it would help. And Pang Kee was not dissatisfied when she went in and rebarred her door.

When she had sorted and stowed her long, cold toil's spoil, and had cleaned and thawed her hands in hot water, she ate again—and ate well. Pang Kee intended to take great care of herself now, even to rest when she felt great need, since she was mother, protector and nurse to her flower-one. She chose for her meal what would keep eatable the least long: the fresh fish and a millet-cake. But she, too, made a bowl of tea, counting the leaves she used. And she gave the Kitchen-god a crumb of the cake; she'd eat it herself in the morning if Tsao Shên had not cared to eat it in the night.

The rat—really it was splendidly big and fat! And when she skinned it, the soft, delicate fur would furnish her for a pair of wee first shoes. She was glad the rat had so silken a coat and so pretty a color, and because of that she caressed it gently with her now warm hands before she stored it up on the great lump of salt, which she could just reach by standing tiptoe on the edge of the *k'ang*. The rat was so thoroughly frozen that she felt sure it would "keep" well enough for several days; and the salt would help to preserve it; and some Chinese like their game high. Pang Kee did. She was very pleased with the rat. Why, even its bones would burn when she had picked them quite bare. It was a most useful find.

Pang Kee sang to herself softly as she cleaned her dish and mended the fire. And when her baby woke she laughed and crowed to it as she toasted its tiny toes by the fire, and made it comfortable for the night, and satisfied its supper-hunger.

Pang Kee was happy when she lay down to sleep.

CHAPTER VI

PANG KEE was rich now. To have love, to feel love and to have content is wealth—invulnerable wealth.

Her daily life was scanted and heavy drudgery, almost every daylight hour a struggle. But she was richly content. She loved her baby, unmistakably her baby loved her. Pang Kee was often cold, very often hungry, but she envied no one, would—and she could—have changed places with none. And half the women in rich men's courtyards, silk-clad, bejeweled, soft-fed, well might have envied Pang Kee.

The child throve.

Sometimes when she lay down at night, hungrier than thrift should tolerate such a woman needing to be, when at last she slept Pang Kee dreamed richly: dreamed that a prince-one had wed and loyally cherished Pang Soo, and dreamed that at the marriage feasting she, the honored mother of the beautiful bride, squatted in the palace courtyard eating her fill of white rice.

And when she woke, more often than not Pang Kee remembered her night-time dream; and it gladdened all the toil of her driven, burdened day—it and the touch of Pang Soo's clinging fingers.

When Pang Soo was four years old not a coin that Zut Qu had given had been spent. Pang Kee had needed to spend a piece or two more than once, but she had doggedly held on without even one such expenditure. She even had added a coin—a very small coin—to her hidden hoard four or five times in the three years that had passed since her daughter's birth. Being a Chinese baby Pang Soo had been one year old at birth: a great advantage in a country where age outranks rank, far outranks wealth; *is* wealth and rank since it commands respect and service, and is

powerful with an authority that is never denied or resisted.

The three years of this her latest motherhood had been hard and sharp, from Lanterns' Feast to Lanterns' Feast, and often hungered for Pang Kee. But cold never again had come to their hut, and never had hunger come to Pang Soo.

Difficulties and threatened want had stalked Pang Kee; but no ill thing had stalked Pang Soo. Pang Kee had seen to that.

And because of Pang Soo, every hour Pang Kee had counted herself rich.

She had put her Chinese woman's need of a son from her forever; grimly, resolutely. She was not old—time had not blessed or cursed her with that yet; she was not uncomely—toil and poverty had not done that to her, want and anxiety had not branded her as it branded so many whose scant security was ten times hers, and whose flesh-aching toil was but a fraction of hers. But she knew that she would have no son. An illegitimate son could not have rescued Pang Lee from Purgatory, unless she could have bribed the priests to induce Pang Lee, down in the torturing Yellow Springs, to adopt the son of her shame. She canvassed that once or twice; and dismissed it. For so tremendous a service the priests would have demanded a great wage, a sum Pang Kee never could pay.

Too, she believed that not all the priests in China could have prevailed upon Pang Lee to consent. And the child would have been the property of its actual living father. Even if she could have killed that inconvenient man, and escaped detection, the child still would have belonged to its father's legitimate heirs. That she might not have known who they were or where they lived, that the priests might not have been able to find them or to find out who they were, altered nothing. The ill-born son would have *belonged* to his father's people and could not have been adopted—not even by a ghost down in the cold nether world—without the consent of the man who owned him.

It bristled with difficulties. Pang Kee renounced all thought of it—the little she ever had thought of it.

Curiously, it did not occur to her slow mind that the child might be a daughter!

She could not hope for a son born in wedlock. Few would take a widow to wife, none a destitute widow, who lacked even one fair garment, a talisman of jade, any charm or allurement; a widow cramped in life, roughened by coarse, heavy toil. Nor could she have achieved it by some miracle-intervention of hundred-handed Kwan, would it have served her purpose adequately better than her bearing of an ill-born son. A legitimate son could save her herself from permanent Purgatory, but could have done nothing whatever for sonless Pang Lee.

If the fantastic thing could have been—a man willing to wed her, and a son born of it—that child would have been its father's, the servant and priest of its father's tomb. And it was for Pang Lee far more than for herself that the Chinese woman's faithful peasant heart craved the filial prayers and grave-side observances that alone can secure the welfare of any gone-on-one. If Pang Lee must keep forever his misery down in the dank Yellow Springs, she would rather keep hers there with him, companion and share his everlasting misery, than dwell On High in ease and plenty without him. Pang Kee would not have accepted marriage, had such re-marriage been not impossible.

Nor could she adopt a son for Pang Lee. Only influence and wealth could have compassed that. The idea—last resource though it was—was even more visionary, impossible of realization than either of the two impossible others.

It all was too full of difficulties.

Pang Kee put it from her.

And, strange as it was, she no longer wished to have a son—perhaps the first woman in all China's history who did not wish to have a son.

She even would have resented it now; for his sister's sake, she would have been jealous of such a son. She had

wrenched her Chinese soul, the history of all Chinese womanhood, in her first acceptance of the girl she had borne; the intense travail of that—instant and instinctive though it was—had added its own intensity and force to the love she gave her daughter. Because she so loved Pang Soo she had no wish for a son, no welcome to spare him.

Little by little she almost forgot Pang Lee in the new love that obsessed her: her love for their daughter whom she had borne him in the loneliness of widowhood, and in the sharper than childbirth pangs of grinding, relentless poverty.

Only one thing, as their years together welded them, rivaled even occasionally Pang Soo in the heart of Pang Kee her mother: rice.

For still the woman craved to eat, if but once, her fill of white rice.

As her treasured hoard of small coins grew, sometimes at night while the child slept she divided it into two very unequal parts, and palming and fingering the smaller part questioned how many grains of rice it would buy, could she bring herself to so rob the unconscious baby girl to whose future it was dedicated.

She longed to!

Weeks and months passed during which she never so much as thought of rice. Then again—gradually or suddenly—her lifelong obsession, creature-craving, came back. Often it was slight, a weak annoyance, a mild suggestion rather than any disturbance. At other times it was physical and mental torture, unnerving and grueling. To crave for what one never has had or known can be more cruel and more persistent than the craving of any appetite whose wonted indulgence is thwarted or debarred.

And then Pang Kee ached to rob the treasured coins of the price of a handful of white rice.

But she never did.

Her throat ached, her mouth parched and twitched, her

eyes filled—and she put the money back into its hiding-place.

She would need it all; it and all she could contrive to add to it, for Pang Soo! The binding of the tender feet, in so few years, would cost a good deal. It should be well done, and done as nearly painlessly as it could. On both of those Pang Kee was resolved. No bungler should bend back and strap Pang Soo's toes. Experts charge much; the gifted specialist comes high. Opium and music to divert Pang Soo's attention and to quell her pain would cost as much or more. Pang Soo should have both. Pang Kee clenched her lips and put the coins back.

She was greatly tempted, but she was stronger than her half-crazy craving. Some day perhaps there'd be enough for both—enough for all she planned to do for Pang Soo—and she planned much—and enough left over to buy a bowl of rice.

Craze clamored, but mother-love prevailed.

Her mouth watered, her stomach sickened, for what they never had tasted.

Craze clamored, but mother-love prevailed.

An imagined appetite can be as great, sharp, relentless, persistent as can any appetite rooted in experience and intelligence. Too, the odd craving of Pang Kee's was but the stronger and more clamorous because it was her only one, the only one she ever had had.

Pang Kee was honest, all but overscrupulously honest even for a Chinese—earth's most honest race. Given the opportunity, she would have stolen rice, white rice, just once. She would not rob Pang Soo of a *cash.*

A less ignorant woman might have understood that to gratify, and so kill, her great craving, probably would be economy and sound investment; leaving her thought—"mind" were too irrelevant a word to use of this peasant woman—free and more able to work, her very body fitter for its heavy tasks. But even such alphabetic philosophy was beyond the reach of Pang Kee; and she kept the gnaw-

ing demon with her—the craving that, once indulged, might have been satisfied and scotched, or even disillusioned and disappointed.

CHAPTER VII

THAT Zut Qu did not return did not surprise Pang Kee. Why should the eminent old-one do such unprecedented beneficence again? But Zut Qu had promised to send occasional doles. None came. And Pang Kee wondered: not that Zut Qu had not sent, but that the gifts had miscarried. Pang Kee had no doubt that Zut Qu had sent, had kept her word. The messenger she had sent had disobeyed—and stolen. That did surprise Pang Kee greatly; for she scarcely could credit that any one would dare to disobey and deceive the powerful witch-one, Zut Qu. All the district knew how venomous the she-wizard's rage was, how quick she was to strike, how powerful and sure her punishing. Almost Pang Kee admired the courage of any who had disobeyed Zut Qu.

When the child was a little older and sturdier, the way easier because kinder, warmer moons had come, she would make her way, Pang Kee planned, to the great old-one's fortress den, carrying the babe-one with her, of course; go fearlessly—Zut Qu would not withdraw the something of freemasonry that always had been between them; go in gratitude and courtesy to make obeisance, with Pang Soo in her arms, to their benefactor, *k'o-tow* before generous Zut Qu, and leave or linger as Zut Qu indicated her will. If Zut Qu questioned of the gifts sent but not received, she would answer Zut Qu promptly and entirely truthfully. And if Zut Qu did, not again would anything Zut Qu sent go astray.

But it was not for that that Pang Kee the peasant purposed to go to Zut Qu. She regretted her loss of what the other had sent her, she resented the carrier's perfidy, she

would welcome Zut Qu's future bounty; but her gratitude for what Zut Qu had done was tenfold more than any thought of gaining gifts to come. And Pang Kee, the ignorant, uncultured peasant, would have been as keen to go to Zut Qu and make obeisance if she had felt assured that never again a *cash* or a crumb would Zut Qu bestow.

She would take Pang Soo with her because else she herself could not go: they two never were parted. She kept the babe-one with her almost as uninterruptedly as if it still lived in her mothering womb; that she did was both precaution and love. No one would filch a girl babe. Pang Kee had little fear that anything human would harm the helpless wee-one, and the demons that swooped down on little boys, and carried them off to their demonic lairs, would disdain to burden themselves with the spoil of a worthless girl. Boys were stolen not infrequently; no girl ever had been or would be, no girl too young to work or to be sold to a pleasure-house. The child was safe. And without her Pang Kee could have trudged farther and toiled better. But the baby might be frightened, and surely would grow hungry; it was not old or strong enough yet to bear safely the Chinese peasant's yoke of famine and cold. The child must be suckled, and warmed if only by the warmth of Pang Kee's own shivered body. So, always they were inseparable; and, because they were, Pang Kee earned less, found less than she could have done freed of the handicap she adored.

Because she could not leave Pang Soo behind her, or journey so far with her, Pang Kee was compelled to delay going to Zut Qu. Even if she could have gone without the child, left her, until her return, at the hut of some kindly woman who lived nearer their own, as indeed she perhaps might have managed to do—none was unfriendly to widowed Pang Kee—she did not wish to do it. She longed for Zut Qu to see the beautiful-one, note how she'd grown, see how exquisite she grew—fair like a flower, tranquil like moonlight on a pool in summer. Pang Kee was proud of

Pang Soo. Nor was the mother reluctant that—if Kwan so willed it—the powerful recluse might appreciate the tender daughter, like and befriend her.

Pang Kee knew that a terrible evil-eye was reported of Zut Qu. Pang Kee did not doubt that it was true.

But for herself or for hers she had no fear of Zut Qu. As soon could Pang Kee have cursed Pang Soo and dealt the child she loved a scarring blow as she could have doubted or feared Zut Qu. Let all others fear and shrink as they did from the magic-one; for Zut Qu Pang Kee had nothing but affection and gratitude.

Zut Qu was their friend.

Pang Kee longed to go to her; and planned it again and again.

Delay followed delay.

Once the child ailed; another time Pang Kee herself did—not enough to cause her to relax her strenuous industry, but enough to make her shrink from the double long, hard trudge.

A lucky stretch of work, better paid than work of Pang Kee's often was, came to her in Pang Soo's second summer; to interrupt or forego it for even an hour never could have occurred to Pang Kee. And the going to Zut Qu would eat up many hours.

She intended to go to Zut Qu, the intention was firm, something religious, but it would have to be carried out both at some time of employment-shortage and in gracious weather. The combination proved difficult. Pang Kee was not often lucked to have work that gave her a wage. But she always could find something to do that remunerated her in some way—if only with bark and twigs garnered by the shrub-edged waysides.

Nor did she clearly realize the full passing of time. Time means much to but few Chinese, perhaps because they live so much with their ancestors, and think in terms of eternity; looking forward to On High more definitely than their interest and thought often are focused on to-day and

on earth things. And this lone woman had less than even the peasant-average of intelligence. She could count little better than the aboriginals of New South Wales; the abacus that Pang Lee had used so capably had always seemed to her a fearsome complication, impossible for her to master, presumptuous for her to attempt to use. She had admired Pang Lee for much, but for nothing else so abjectly as she did for his scholarly manipulation of his abacus.

The flight of time had no numerical significance to Pang Kee. She knew that hot moons followed cold moons, that cold ones followed the hot with regrettable sureness. She knew that the thin yellow flowers showed sparsely in the long twisting pumpkin vines before the sturdy, globular edible vegetables did. She knew that the farmer must plant his seed before he could husband his harvest. But what those things counted in days or in moons she never had considered. The Chinese have no week; perhaps their lack of that conveniently short punctuation of time makes for the Chinese peasants' general disregard of periods of time. Sunrise and sunset keep them minded of days' succession of days. They know their festivals. But they do not think in calendar periods of time as the Occident does, and as the more educated Chinese more or less do.

But Pang Kee knew that Pang Soo grew. She did not see it day by day, but she remembered too exactly every hour of the baby's life not to realize that her bud was swelling and gaining in age as well as in beauty and charm. And always it reminded her that their visit of ceremony and of gratitude was due and overdue to the one but for whose kindness they both must have perished at Pang Soo's birth-time. Pang Kee delayed, because she had to, but she did not forget.

And the great day came at last.

They started at dawn, almost before dawn; the sky was a silvered gray, faintly flamed with pale green at the horizon—daylight promised rather than come. Several stars still kept pallid attendance over the fading moon. The

light on the path was the waning light of a brilliant night.

They traveled slow; the toddler's hand kept close in the mother's. Pang Kee would carry her presently. But the little thing was sturdy, she well could walk a fraction of a *li* now and then. But when she walked they had to go snail-slow.

Perhaps some charitable barrow-man would give them an uncharged-for lift, if one overtook them going in their direction, and he not loaded, or but half loaded. It had happened them once and more. Pang Kee wished that it might happen to-day. The heavy burdens she often carried she did not carry now, but she was not quite unburdened, and Pang Soo could not walk far, and must not walk when the sweltering heat of the day came.

Pang Kee had slung on her back their food for the day. Zut Qu might give them to eat, she might not. And Pang Kee purposed not to reach home again until night was darkening. It was a festival day in the City. And if Zut Qu did not bid them stay and rest, Pang Kee intended to rest and eat by the wayside and then give Pang Soo at least a peep at the festival; Pang Soo's first sight of the picture of Chinese life.

Pang Kee did not define it so clearly in her own mind. Her mental equipment was thick, more apt to fuddle than to analyze or to plan or think definitely. Even her intense schemes for Pang Soo's future were largely subconscious. And when the conscious surface mind is dull and sluggish rarely is the subconscious mind sharp-edged or efficient. What the peasant woman planned for her child was more a heart instinct and maternal stubbornness than a mental process. It was altogether without program. She knew what she wished and intended to get for Pang Soo, she had no idea of how she was going to get it.

Besides the food and drink she carried, she carried, too, a gift for Zut Qu—cheap but bulky, not convenient to carry—and a carefully prepared parcel that held Pang Soo's best clothes. They had been procured and contrived with

toil and self-sacrifice; they must not be torn or smeared as they went. Pang Kee would undress and re-dress Pang Soo when they were near the wizard-one's cave, before they reached it.

The air was sweet with the wildwood smells of early summer. Snow and ice were but memories. On the *lan* and the juniper trees the incurled leaves of gray-green were curling out to drink the more warmth of Six-moon. Little wild-flowers began to show shyly, if you looked for them. Sap was dancing in trunks and branches, tingling in the twig-tips. The summer birds were coming back to Shantung Province. Soon the cicada would sing its pretty song. It was scarcely more than one-coat weather to-day; and summer comes late and slow to northern Shantung. The scarecrows were busy already, teetering at every stir of air, leering-faced, grotesquely garbed, conspicuously perched in garden-plots and grain-fields, although they had had nothing to do yet in the Serpent-moon.

Pang Kee had carried Pang Soo her daughter more than once before they met any one: a shepherd trudging home after his night watch. He gave them greeting, a smile to plump, laughing Pang Soo, but he was crossing their path, not going it, and he looked too fagged reasonably to be expected to carry, out of unpaid good-nature, more than the weary self that he was carrying. Pang Kee gave him greeting for greeting, and trudged on sturdily with Pang Soo in one arm, the pot of musk, her offering to Zut Qu, in her other arm, lunch, breakfast, and supper on her back, Pang Soo's new best clothes carefully secured on her hip.

She did not hurry—that would waste breath and strength, delay more than it gained—nor did she slacken; she kept one steady jog-trot pace, which was much what her life had been, and the life of millions of such Chinese women as she. She just went doggedly on except when Pang Soo cried out for a wayside flower. When Pang Soo did, Pang Kee did not deny her. Such mothers know—

whether they consciously articulate the knowing or not—that such joys as a child of theirs is apt to gain from life's long callousing drudgery will be small joys; not to be neglected when they offer themselves.

A tiny purple blossom, the commonest and the most persistent of China's flowers, pin-pricked with color the path's dusty sand; Pang Soo saw and clamored, Pang Kee bent and gathered. A catkin shook its gray and pink tassel on a rough-hewn bank; Pang Soo saw and coveted, Pang Kee panted up the bank, and broke off the pretty bauble thing. A rosy pebble, presently a pebble that was tawny orange, caught the baby's eyes—for amber and cornelian strew the Shantung earth farther from the ocean's wash than cornelian and amber do in Suffolk. A butterfly offered Pang Kee a hopeless chase, scores of butterflies did. But Pang Kee did not chase them. She would not delay for what she knew she could not get for her little daughter; and she told Pang Soo so. The disappointed child was docile; her tiny face grew grave, but it did not pucker, and she only snuggled a little closer to her mother with a baby sigh.

When the sun was high they squatted down a little from the narrow footway, and ate together coarse food coarsely cooked or raw. They found it good. They ate carefully—even the baby did—as Arctic explorers do, lest a crumb fell unseen and were wasted. Several fragments did slip from the child's uncertain fingers, but not a crumb escaped them. They caught up each almost as it reached the ground. And a blue-breasted robin tilting near them on a wild cotton plant, was disappointed; a ladybird waiting hungrily, turned and crawled away sulkily back to the dingy pathway.

A little farther on some one criminally careless—but Pang Kee and Pang Soo cordially forgave him—had dropped a half-ripe peach—not grown in Shantung! Pang Kee pounced on it; Pang Soo ate it. But Pang Kee sucked the stone until it was clean of even the tiniest shred of

flesh. The peach stone might have miscarried in Pang Soo's soft mouth. When the stone was fleshless and nearly tasteless the woman broke it between two stones; they shared the tasty kernel; Pang Kee kept the broken stone.

As they neared the City the child's eyes blinked with pleased excitement. Even Pang Kee thought that half the people in all China were making for the festival. And to Pang Kee China was the world: she had heard or dreamed of no other country.

The gathering crowd was gaily clad, and their yellow faces were beaming and happy. Pang Soo laughed and crowed, stretched out her fat arms to them. They laughed back at her. A man gave her a cake, a woman spared her a sweetmeat, an urchin, poorer clad than most here, made fine only with a red rose in his shabby girdle, pulled off the flower and gave it to the baby. Baby loved the fragrant gift, thought it princely—which it was—and laid her flower-soft cheek against it softly. And Shu A-fah went on roseless but happy with the surging crowd pressing thickly now towards the City's southern gate. Over her mother's shoulder Pang Soo looked after him longingly, wishing her mother would follow him through the cram of many colors, whimpered a little when Pang Kee did not. But the red rose had a lovely smell, it was smooth and soft; Pang Soo stroked it gently, and was glad again and comforted. And Pang Kee, slow of wit, dense to most things less material than food and fuel, but always quick and understanding toward her daughter, said, "Thou shalt see it presently, wee-one; see the lights and puppets, hear the music."

Pang Soo did not understand her mother's words. She knew what "light" was, she never had seen a puppet, she did not know what "music" meant. But she read a jocund promise from the mother's voice, and was content to be patient for its fulfilment; the child of a patient race, born of a caste steeped in constant patience for thousands of toiling, hungered years.

Twice again they rested, and shared a little of the food that the woman carried.

The hour-of-the-serpent showed the Day-star high in the brazen sky when up on a cliff above them in the distance Pang Kee saw the cave of Zut Qu the wizard-woman; saw the entrance of the odd woman's as odd dwelling; saw because she knew it was there. For many *li* all knew that it was there, knew that Zut Qu's home was deep-caved in the invincible mountainside, invisible until you were in it; the entrance as invisible as the cave itself—a slit scarcely man-wide, less than man-tall, well back in a bend of rock.

It was time to re-dress Pang Soo.

Pang Kee looked about for the where to do it.

A group of stunted camphor trees, ill-grown, bent by many storms, broken and half decayed, interrupted and thwarted of natural development by their ill-suited site, huddled together disconsolately where a gray thread of discouraged water struggled wearily through a barricade of rocks to pool meagerly about the roots of the camphors. It would serve. It was not far, and far enough from the now almost obliterated path.

Beside the stagnant pool, green with growth and slime, Pang Kee sat down and let sun-scorched Pang Soo slip from her arms on to the ground beside her. The child gurgled gratefully. Not that Pang Soo objected to the scorch of the sun; she was happily used to it, and she was Chinese. But she was glad to be free from the loving but tight clutch of her mother's arms for a time. It had been nice up there at her mother's shoulder, traveling without exertion, seeing the world from such high and safe vantage; it was even nicer to be free of feet and will for a time.

Pang Kee put the pot of musk down in the edge of the shallow pool, that it might drink and freshen after the long, hot journey it had come. She put down her two other burdens, and she loosened her garments. It was not even one-coat weather now. It was good to rest a while.

Pang Soo tugged at her own clothes suggestively, and her mother laughed and obeyed.

It did not take long. When they had started from home Soo's soft little body had been well wrapped from the dawn's comparative chill. One by one the wrappings had been shed as the sun rose higher and the day grew hotter, until now she wore only a tiny pair of stout, serviceable shoes and a brief smock of coarse, but not rough, sacking.

The baby held up her wee arms as far and as straight as she could.

"Skin rabbit!" she demanded. The expression was old in China before Columbus came to America.

And Pang Kee skinned her dear rabbit, peeling up and off her daughter's one garment.

Pang Soo held out a suggestive foot.

But Pang Kee denied her idol that. The ground was rough. Those dear feet must not be scratched or bruised.

Pang Soo murmured discontentedly, but she did not persist. She stretched and wriggled her delightful nakedness instead, and patted her stomach approvingly with her plump roseleaf hands; a pretty, naked Chinese baby, amber-skinned, jet-eyed, jet-haired, dressed in a pair of gay padded shoes and a self-satisfied smile.

The child toddled about lazily.

The mother sat and rested; glad that the first half of her long walk was so nearly accomplished. She was more than pleasantly tired.

The baby walked into the thin pool so quietly, the fall of her tiny feet well hushed by her thick-padded shoes, that Pang Kee did not hear or notice.

But she heard the splash and the gurgled cry of mischievous gladness when Pang Soo tumbled over, and lay kicking and laughing full in the pond.

"Your shoes! Your shoes, bad-one!" Pang Kee cried half in anger, half in outraged economy. Forgetting fatigue she pulled herself up and made for the water. For

Pang Soo she was not in the least disturbed: the child was too sturdy, the pool was too shallow. For the child's appearance, and even more for the little shoes, the woman was much disturbed. How was she to dry the imp-one, how clean her, before she put the tiny best clothes on her? And the shoes! They were not the precious best shoes in which the mite would *k'o-tow* to great and powerful Zut Qu, if luckily they found Zut Qu at home and gracious to admit them, but they were very good shoes, better footgear than Pang Kee had worn for years. Not that the woman did not have stout, serviceable shoes and more than one pair. Whatever else a Chinese woman's toilet outfit lacks, it rarely lacks shoes. And women who toil out-of-doors in Shantung, both winter and summer, must be sufficiently shod; well-soled shoes are indispensable.

Pang Kee made her own shoes—millions of Chinese women do, gentle as well as peasant. She made Pang Soo's. Her own she fashioned only for service, as stout and as plain as she could make them. They'd have cost very little if she had bought them; made by her own indefatigable hands they had cost almost nothing. But the shoes of Pang Soo, even her everyday shoes, were another matter. They were gay of color—had been before the stagnant, green-slimed pool had soaked them—and on each Pang Kee had stitched flowers and good-luck symbols, embroidering with patient calloused fingers not only the toes and sides, but the soles as well. The materials for her own shoes she had had by her, saved and hoarded carefully from her wayside findings. She had bought the scraps of scarlet felt out of which she had fashioned her daughter's shoes, and had bought the threads of silk with which she had embroidered them.

"Your shoes! Your beautiful shoes!" she cried again.

Pang Soo, prone on her back, stuck up her dripping legs exultantly, admired them for a moment before she waved them slowly back and forth, wriggling her toes, clacking her heels together as if they'd been soaked castanets. The squashing sound they made sounded deliciously. Pang Soo

did it again. She waved her legs in downright ecstasy. She wriggled her supple toes vigorously. A shoe came off.

"*O-aie!*" poor Pang Kee cried in despair.

The baby giggled.

How to get her! How to get back the shoes!

Pang Kee had brought no change of raiment along for herself; she had none. As she was she must appear before Zat Qu. She could not wade into the pool, nor drench herself with the steaming wetness of Pang Soo.

"Water-rat!" she chided disgustedly. And then she sighed. But then she laughed. The baby looked so pretty and was so happy!

Should she strip herself, and so go in after the child, and grovel in the pool's bottom for the shoe, which had disappeared? She could not wade in dressed as she was. She could not soak her own shoes. But if she did take off her own clothes, how was she to dry herself after? How she was to dry Pang Soo was problem enough.

The pool was so shallow that the woman need not have wet her own legs far above her ankles. But she did not think of that; her limited mind was fuddled by the small disaster with which giggling Pang Soo had afflicted her.

And time was passing; and they still had a rocky, almost vertical climb to make before they reached the narrow crevice-entrance to the witch-woman's cave. The peasant mother was genuinely distressed.

But what a picture! Even in her small momentary worry, Pang Kee's tired eyes glowed as she looked. The little amber-tinted baby-body lay at perfect ease, half in, half out of the green-veiled water, her eyes impish on her mother, her tiny pink-lined hands up-reached in joyous attempt to catch the iridescent dragon-flies that skimmed so invitingly near; the sun pouring its hot gold through the stately camphor trees, blue and lemon lilies crowding the moss, ferns and heart-flowers crowding the lilies, anemones pushing the ferns aside. The sky was an imperial umbrella of molten blue. The great rock behind,

gray and black, was delicately embroidered here and there with lichens.

"Come! Roll to me, bad-one!" Pang Kee implored. "Come lest I thrash thee!" she threatened.

She coaxed, and Pang Soo smiled lazily and went on paddling her hands up in the air, to catch dragon-flies.

Pang Kee scolded. Pang Soo paid no heed. Pang Kee grew explosive; she raved at Pang Soo. And Pang Soo rolled over a little and laughed admiringly. Pang Kee never had scolded or threatened Pang Soo before. Pang Soo knew it not for what it was; had no manner of doubt that the surprising noise and grimaces her mother was making were a splendid verbal-and-facial fireworks contrived and displayed for her own entertainment. And Pang Soo, always obliging, was vastly entertained. She forgot the lovely elusive dragon-flies skimming so temptingly near, and kicked in riotous applause, clutching her stomach lest her mirth prove too shattering.

Pang Kee collapsed on the fern-flecked moss, and began to cry quietly. A slow tear trickled down Pang Kee's cow-like face.

Pang Soo understood that. She knew it meant that her loved mother-one was troubled, and she was troubled too; for always they shared everything, good or bad, food or hunger, plenty or want, fire in the winter or fuel's lack, melons in summer when melons were cheapest, the storm's gray fury, music of birds, the pictures the sunset painted. She had not often seen her mother weep—Pang Kee rarely had time to allow herself the cooling relief of tears—but Pang Soo had seen it before; she knew it meant pinch, sharp fatigue, crisis or perplexity. Always it hurt and dismayed her.

She crawled out, and toddled to her mother; clutched at her mother to comfort her.

Pang Kee was instantly comforted, and ridiculously grateful; but she declined to be clutched. She caught Pang

Soo sharply and firmly by the soft baby shoulders, and held her at bay.

Pang Soo was amazed. Never before had her mother evaded her nearness. In another moment Pang Soo would have whimpered, half in sorrow, half in surprise, wholly in indignation.

"Think you I want my clothes filthed too, you wet-filthed-one! I have no festival jacket and trousers, no shoes of silk-sewn satin, to put on me when you have made dirty as you what I am wearing. Or think you I can go to the great Zut Qu as naked as you now are? It is not so that one pays a visit of ceremony and thanks. Stay where you are, my precious small-one!"

Pang Soo sucked her thumb and pouted; so ravishingly pretty, pouting and naked, that Pang Kee all but snatched her close to cuddle at all cost.

But time pressed!

How to clean her? How to dry her?

Except the smock Pang Soo had worn here, Pang Soo's sacred festival costume, and what Pang Kee herself wore, there was not an available shred between them.

Their food was in a mat that Pang Soo had woven out of coarse grass, the festival garments were folded in another. Even if they were sacrificed, they would scratch soft infant flesh abominably, and not be of much use anyway as toweling. Pang Kee herself wore three garments—if her head-band of black stuff could be called garment. Her black trousers were made of thick oil-stiff cloth, her blue tunic-coat was stiffer than starch, and its fabric was wire-harsh.

Pang Kee sighed.

But she "made do." All her hard peasant life she had had to "make do." She was an adept of the hard art.

She stood Pang Soo to drip on the moss where the sun blazed down unbroken by tree or by so much as a fern. When the fierce heat had done its work, mercifully without making the child's sun-used Chinese skin perspire, the

mother scraped her clean, carefully but thoroughly, with leaves and twigs and handfuls of grass. Pang Soo enjoyed it hugely. When it was done she was tomato-red. Pang Kee sighed again. She hoped that such of the violent color as the best clothes did not cover would disappear before they reached Zut Qu's cave. The new clothes were unpacked and adjusted: the gold-worked cap, hung with the charms that protect young children, the embroidered, coral-buttoned green jacket, the bright blue trousers spotted with black luck-bats, three little rings on three wee fingers, snow-white stockings, the gorgeous shoes, the long necklace of thin silk tassels that the mother's patient rough fingers had made.

The child's tiny fingers still clutched the now draggled rose. The sun had wilted it, the pool had slimed it. But the baby would not let the mother take it away. Pang Kee sighed, but yielded.

The food left them was hidden under a stone behind a camphor tree. The wet smock was spread out to dry, where the sun poured on it, but where, Pang Kee hoped anxiously, it would not be seen. If it were seen and stolen, it couldn't be helped. As it was now, it would drip in the matting that had covered the new clothes, and make it unfit to cover them again. Fished up by a long camphor branch, the water-logged shoes, turned upside down to drain, were left to their fate, with a hurried prayer for their safety.

Pang Kee's heart glowed; Pang Soo decked and drilled to please Zut Qu, as rosy youth the world over constantly is to catch the failing eyes and attract the liking of old age that has wealth, looked a princess! Surely Zut Qu would admire her.

Baby in one arm, little laughing face nodding over one shoulder, crock of pungent musk in her other arm, Pang Kee began the stiff ascent up the steep, pathless rock that led to Zut Qu's cavern home.

CHAPTER VIII

PANG KEE'S breath was short when they reached the entrance of the cave. Pang Soo's fairness had returned. Her mother had carried her all the way—in care of the fine new clothes, especially the silk-embroidered satin shoes. Pang Soo was daisy-fresh. Pang Kee had to stand very still, resting so until her spent lungs somewhat rightened themselves. Her legs were trembling, her arms were numb, and her face had changed colors with the twig-scraped face of Pang Soo.

The weight of Pang Soo was little to Pang Kee, accustomed—since little older than her child was now—to carry far heavier burdens; and the weight of the crock of musk was lighter than Pang Soo. But Pang Soo, a restless passenger, had wriggled disturbingly, the crock was an awkward shape, unwieldy in size. And child and pot had not balanced very manageably in the woman's weary arms.

The hot drench of the sun, almost at the zenith now, was nothing to Pang Kee, though it poured directly on her unprotected head. The head-band is a convention, a fashion, no protection. The heat of the hottest sun is refreshment to Chinese. But the ascending fumes of the scent-thick musk were overpowering. Musk lost its perfume years ago—a world loss of pungent perfume which naturalists fear will not come again. But when Pang Kee climbed Zut Qu's rock that day the Yehonola T'zu Hsi was a new-come concubine-bride in the harem of the Emperor Hsien-Feng in Peking's Forbidden City, and musk still kept its passionate scent. Pang Kee was a little dazed by the intoxicating scent of the yellow musk she carried as tribute to Zut Qu. It stung her eyes, it tasted bitter on her mouth, it curled teasingly in her panting nostrils.

Half-way up the hill the sun no longer found them, they were climbing now through a narrow cleft so deep and

hidden in the stone's high-towered sides. And it was cold, here where the sun never effectually pierced. Nothing was sun-soaked here in sun-soaked Lotus-moon, not even the path that wasn't a path, but a way that Pang Kee found, and desperately, cautiously, walked: fragments of fallen stone no longer perpendicular, but disagreeably sharp and perilously smooth.

Pang Kee trudged on, the scent of the musk half blinding her, the sudden dark thwarting her sight also. Pang Soo kept still at last in her mother's guarding arms. She was used to darkness in their hovel-home, if she woke in the night, or when in winter Pang Kee chanced to have no work to do, and would not waste a candle flame. But dark at home, and this strange darkness in this strange place of gloom, were not alike. The mite was awed and hushed. She stared in front of her warily. But she was not afraid. She trusted her mother too fully for fear to find her in her mother's arms. She was expectant of developments, and she depended upon Pang Kee to carry her soon into light and warmth. Being a Chinese baby she could do with any amount of light and heat, but—for all she was Shantung-born—abhorred the cold and the dark. To Pang Kee darkness was nothing, so long as she could find and sense her way with her muscular, goat-sure feet; and for once she welcomed the cold, it seemed to ease her fatigue, to ease her breathing, to stimulate her. Pang Kee plodded on, carrying Pang Soo and carrying the crock of musk carefully.

They reached the spot where the old disk hung, the gong the peasants struck to ask if Zut Qu would let them enter. That it and all about it was so blanketed by cobwebs, so crusted with dust, ought to have told her that the cave was deserted, uninhabited. For they were in the full daylight again. But the peasant woman, benumbed with weariness, never agile of mind, did not understand.

The three signal boughs of fir no longer were there—they had dropped and broken up into dust that the temp-

ests had scattered long ago. And, not finding them, no peasant had ventured to go in to the lair of Zut Qu. If it was her pleasure to keep them waiting and debarred for a lifetime, for their lifetime they would wait. Again and again, some one of them, needing her aid, had come here to purchase her skill; and not finding the three boughs of fir that permitted them to strike the gong, had sighed or grunted dejectedly, and turned and gone patiently away. Until at length they had given up coming the fruitless journey.

Pang Kee never had come here to consult Zut Qu, never had stood here with offered coin in her hand. Only the long-ago once had she been here before—but a few years older then than Pang Soo was now. She had no friends in the city below, where most of the wizard's clients lived—there and in the scattered hamlets and huts between there and here. Zut Qu's fame had spread far, but her customers for the most were herded near her. She was too often inaccessible, her willingness to serve too precarious, for would-be customers to seek her from far. Every Shantung city, almost every Shantung village, had its own luck-one, always ready to give a potion or weave a spell—for a price. Zut Qu had ruled even more by fear than by her reputed great power and skill. The evil thing that is near we fear; we think less of an evil afar. Her neighbor-ones obeyed her, and brought her tribute because they lived in terror of what she might do against them. Others, more distant in dwelling, did not feel the clutch of fear of her; if they came, they came for what they could get from her, not to placate her. And few would come a great number of difficult *li,* or come repeatedly, on the chance of gaining an audience that they knew the chances were that she would not grant.

The details of what was needed to win entrance into Zut Qu's cave never had reached Pang Kee. Pang Kee was not more reluctant towards gossip than are the average of her sex and caste; but she very rarely could afford the time for

a not necessary word beyond the "Have you had your bath?" which is the "Good morning" and "How do you do" of every moderately civil Shantungese. Pang Kee never had heard of the three boughs. She never had heard of the ox-leg mallet. But she saw the mallet hanging beside the rusted gong. And she used it.

The bone, too, was thick with dust, thick-shrouded by cobwebs, but because it hung where a gong-mallet should, the woman recognized it for the tool it was. She took it up and smote the great disk with it, softly, deprecatingly, at first.

There was no reply.

Pang Kee beat more urgently.

Pang Soo laughed and kicked with glee. She liked the brazen noise. She tried to beat the gong with her withered rose.

A great rat ran squeaking in terror across their path. A dozen bats flapped distractedly out of the cavern, then flopped sightlessly back to the shelter of its dark. The silence of Zut Qu's home had been unmolested for so long that the sound of Pang Kee's persistent clamoring rewoke it to half-conscious, agitated life.

Pang Kee called; obsequiously at first. There was sickly, not human-sounding, scurry in the cavern.

Pang Kee called insistently, with less ceremony. The flap of feebled wings, the crawl of small creatures alarmed, were the only response.

Pang Kee hesitated, and then went cautiously in. She had come too far to retreat unless they were forced to it. Perhaps the old-one was out; they would wait for her. Perhaps the old-one ailed; she would minister to her, even as once Zut Qu had ministered to her.

That she might the better feel and seek their way with an outstretched hand, she put down the jar of musk; but she held Pang Soo to her close.

The place gave an acrid stench—faint but insistent: a

palsied smell, the smell of a neglected charnel-house, a derelict place of despair.

A clammy something flapped against Pang Kee's face feebly; just brushed, then left, her startled cheek before she could knock it off.

The place felt to have the ominous emptiness of a deserted habitation no longer useful or used.

Pang Kee was frightened. But she went in a little farther, feeling her way with feet and shoulder, holding Pang Soo to her still more closely.

As Zut Qu had fumbled on a shelf years ago, Pang Kee fumbled now in her girdle, and found her flints. The light they gave was brief, but it served. Pang Kee was quick-eyed. She saw a wick protruding from a shapeless overturned candle. The woman succeeded in making a light, presently another, then another, found candle spikes, and impaled the candles she had lit: meager specks of light in the cave's solid gloom at first. But the light grew better, and Pang Kee's eyes grew more accustomed to the denseness of the gloom.

Everything was blanketed in the thick dust of three long years. At first Pang Kee could make out but little. But she persisted. It was cold here. She must make a fire to cheer the old-one's return. Foolish old-one, if she had gone far carrying the golden burden of her many years! Perhaps she had been carried. She had power to command whatever service she would. But the neglect of the place was ominous. Had Zut Qu deserted her home? Gone from it, not to return? Pang Kee began to search; searching for a clue.

In the dusk, which all the light she had contrived in the blackness had lessened a little, her foot stumbled at a heap on the rotting furs that carpeted still richly the great room's stone floor. Pang Kee crouched down and searched with fingers and palm the whatever that had tripped and almost thrown her. Silk, silk that crumbled and fell at

her touch! Fur, silk-soft, thicker than velvet, costly fur a rice-rich red-button might covet! Even in the dim gray she saw a jewel wink, a passionately green jewel. Her hand found a hand, a claw-like mummied hand. And Pang Kee suspected. She bent down close; peered hard, and saw—though dimly—the eyeless, mummied face. And Pang Kee knew.

And, knowing, Pang Kee wept. Pang Kee wept in self-reproach, reproaching herself that she had not found before now a way to come to the succor of Zut Qu, but for whose succor Pang Soo could not have lived; wept bitterly, reproaching herself that she had been guilty of the blackest sin—save only one—with which a Chinese soul can be blackened: the sin of ingratitude.

It could not be wiped out. Not even forgiveness willing and entire can wipe out ingratitude.

But in part she could atone.

Pang Kee smothered her tears—she'd weep long and loud presently—and set briskly about atoning the little she could.

She made Pang Soo snug and cosy in a nest of hurriedly gathered furs and brocades, safe near the entrance where the air was cleaner for human breathing. And Pang Soo, with a quickly collected array of bits—tassels of rag, a pewter cup, a string of beads—to play with, all dusted rapidly against Pang Kee's trousers, sat contentedly sucking her tiny thumb in her rosebud mouth, and watching her mother with interested big black-bead eyes. And generations of bats, hanging head-down from ceiling and crevices, watched the woman, startled and anxious. And generations of rats and mice, adders and vermin, fled from her nearness, racing away to hide in the darkest corners. Pang Kee sighed at the escape of so much good meat.

She would search the place presently. She had no doubt that Zut Qu, so generous to her before, would wish her to find and garner what she could. But first she would pay what honor she could to uncoffined Zut Qu.

She swept rubbish and dirt away from dead Zut Qu. She brought the crock of musk and put it close to the witch-woman's feet. She found Zut Qu's store of candles, and placed a circle of them round Zut Qu, and lit them, murmuring sing-song prayers—such as she'd heard the priests chant—to Kwan, to Yao Wang and to the King-of-the-Ghosts.

She bowed again and again to what had been Zut Qu.

Then she squatted down and made such prayer as she knew: jumbled words snatched rather at random from a vocabulary always peasant-scant and now lessened by long disuse. She muttered the refrain of a love song she'd heard again and again at the village fairs: a disjointed inarticulate muttering of unaccustomed lips. But be sure that Kwan heard!

Thrice she struck her forehead on the floor, and crushed, as she did, lice and beetles crawling away too late and too slow. Pang Kee felt them and knew them the vermin-pests they were. She disliked it. But she would not scant the rites of Zut Qu, who had befriended her in her need. She disliked the smear on her skin, but again, and then once more, she struck the ground with her forehead.

She moaned. She groaned. She sobbed and wailed. She scanted her gone-on of nothing that she could remember as tribute to pay.

The debt of noised mourning honorably paid, she wept again, weeping quietly. And not all of these tears were unselfish. She had hoped so much of mighty Zut Qu. She had builded a golden dream of Pang Soo's pleasing Zut Qu, Zut Qu befriending Pang Soo; befriending Pang Soo richly. The dream was shattered and gone.

As the many candles burned longer, the cave grew steadily lighter.

The uncoffined corpse lay huddled and unseemly. Pang Kee bent over the motionless body, to straighten it, as the corpse of a gone-on should lie for its burial.

She lifted the head to turn it toward the luck of the

Day-star, that the great Day-star might lantern Zut Qu on her weary way to the Yellow Springs, to the judgment of the Purgatory-god.

She lifted the head, and the neck gave, and the face in her hands; what had been flesh fell and scattered in dust, leaving nothing but crumbling, crumbled bones. Pang Kee desisted. Shuddering a little, she rose hurriedly and went to her child.

Pang Soo was fast asleep. Pang Kee, well content that Pang Soo was, looked about her with a buying eye.

Even a little hurried searching showed her that the place of cold desolation, the cave of horrid insect habitation, had in it much that was treasure-trove indeed. And whose, if not hers?

Pang Kee searched, and selected.

She chose what seemed to her best worth taking, and most possible to carry—this time.

She would come again—and again.

The vermin, bats, rats, should not deter her. The crumbling mummy there in the circling candles would not forbid her. She would come again.

But to-day she must gather quickly, and go. Already the hour-of-the-cock must be near, possibly come. The way back was far, it must not be black dark. And she had promised Pang Soo a peep at the fair. It did not occur to her not to keep scrupulously her promise to Pang Soo. She must travel light—comparatively light, lighter than she need when next she went from here, went with a sack on her back and went directly home.

To-day she chose swiftly. In ignorance and haste the peasant woman did not choose very wisely. She left much of more value than what she took, and as easy to hide and to carry. But to her what Pang Kee took was of high value. Their debt to Zut Qu was increased: hers and Pang Soo's.

She filled her bosom. She filled her sleeves. She left

the musk, to joss-stick with rich perfume the feet of Zut Qu until the rats gnawed, as they would, the pungent plant. Why, she wondered, had they spared the corpse of Zut Qu? No doubt, she decided, the great wizard old-one, even in crumbling dust and cracking bones from which the souls had gone, still was powered to bar from her imperious nearness as she would.

Pang Kee covered the corpse with a rug of woven silk, strangely whole still, a splendid costly thing, and weighted down its edges: all she could do to protect the dead from the crawling, gnawing life that infested the place.

Then Pang Kee blew out the candles' flames. It was safer so; and candles, taken a few at a time, would be useful, even a luxury, to have in their own hut. She winced at putting out the funeral lights she had placed round Zut Qu, her only friend. She blew them out last, slowly, one by one, reluctantly. But she dared not leave them burning. She would light them again when she next came. Them she never would take from the corpse of Zut Qu.

Ignorant as she was, Pang Kee suspected, sensed perhaps, that the green stone twinkling at what had been the throat of Zut Qu was a gem of price; but it she never would take. She would take nothing so intimate to the old gone-on. She would do no desecration.

One thing more she took before she blew out the last candle: a cheap little bowl, an ugly little cup, that lay near a fleshless hand; took it to keep in lifelong remembrance; a thing too poor to sell.

Pang Kee left the thing on the floor to the coming dark—and to the rats that ran and crawled, the bats that hung—and went slowly away, Pang Soo asleep in one arm, an improvised bag of knotted rags slung on her other arm, another petition to Kwan Yin in her heart, the City fair her goal.

CHAPTER IX

IN her haste to gain the festival before its keeping was entirely over Pang Kee carried Pang Soo all the way. She rested only once, and when Pang Soo had eaten all her young greediness could of the food still left them, Pang Kee ate the little rest, shouldered her precious burden and trotted steadily on toward the City.

Pang Soo still wore her festive raiment. The peasant mother could not go fine, the clothes she wore were her only ones, but she intended the daughter-one to show bravely among the well-clads at the fair. But wilful Pang Soo still wore the dejectedly jaded rose, and again refused shrilly to let Pang Kee take it from her.

Weary, both from the *li* she'd trudged, what she'd carried, and from the excitement of her discoveries in the sepulcher-cave, for herself Pang Kee would rather have passed the City by, gaining the rest and quiet of their hut the sooner. But she had promised the child, and whether Pang Soo had understood the given pledge or not, it must be fulfilled. A sage of Europe has said and taught that to lie to children and to lunatics is no crime. Not so in barbarian China! To lie to a little child or to an afflicted is to lie to the gods, a not-to-be-forgiven sin. Pang Kee trudged on staunchly—aching, but resolute.

Pang Kee did not recognize the urchin who accosted them at the City gate, nor did Pang Soo, all but asleep. But Shu A-fah knew them. His thin little face moved oddly at the sight of the damaged, faded rose.

"You will have much narrowness to go through, mother-one," he warned. "But it is splendid to see. I was going away now, but with you I will see it again. Give me the sack to carry; you will be narrower without it, better able to push yourself and the babe-one through the throng. And I can carry the sack on my head, going before you to

force a path; I am narrow." He was indeed! "Even with your full sack on my head I shall be narrow, and so—for I am strong—I can wedge a way for your honorable width."

The offer was tempting: the bulged sack grew heavier and heavier; her arm and shoulder ached from its dragging, its knots scalded her wrist. But its contents were precious: all she had gained from a long hard day from which she had hoped to gain so much. Almost stupid—stupid beyond her wont—with sore weariness, she was not stupefied enough to yield her gatherings to a stranger ragamuffin, coatless, hungrily thin.

Pang Kee made no reply, held the sack the closer, and pushed wearily into the densely crowded gate.

The human pack was suffocating. But Pang Kee, for all the years she'd lived and worked alone, was accustomed to Chinese crowds and their smell. And a Chinese crowd, unless provoked, is good-humored. No one jostled her wilfully. Now and then some one made way for her a little: she carried a child, and in her fatigue Pang Kee looked many more than her years.

The boy said no more, but he went just in front of her, cutting with his "narrowness" such foothold as he could for her "wideness." And Pang Kee when she noticed his doing it was not ungrateful, but too was curious and suspicious of why he troubled to do her the service. It was a service. Pang Kee did not speak, but she watched Shu A-fah sharply, and minded her awkward sack well.

It was a long way through the gate, a difficult going. Being a Chinese gate, it was not a gate as Europe deems gates, but a twisted over-roofed passage cut through the City's thick wall. Twice it turned at a sharp angle, once it turned back. Half-way through it was dark; not dark enough for the gatekeeper to light the great lantern that where it was darkest hung from the roof, too dark for tired eyes to see clearly. But they were through the gate at last, in the City, its high wall behind them. A little farther

and they were in the street, decked and lamped, that led to the festival's temple-core. And Pang Soo woke very wide and cried out shrill delight. For this was Chinese fairy-land—to Chinese eyes.

The sky was shut out; no glint of daylight could seep in, the great Day-star might not share or intrude at this human festival. From roof to roof thick matting stretched taut across the long and burnished street; lower here, higher there, as the houses were; a dense, impenetrable roof of matting down from which a thousand lighted lamps and lanterns and ten thousand puppets hung: lovely puppets, impish puppets, gruesome puppets, grinning puppets, priestly puppets, puppet acrobats, flower-clad puppets, puppets clad in gorgeous feathers, god puppets, infant puppets, many others.

China is the home of puppets. And Shantung is the Province of puppet greatness. China's fashioning of puppets is an art, an earnest, pious art; puppet-training and performances are arts not less. This was a carnival of puppets. They were not mere decorations; they were personages. Every one looked at them with interest, many halted to gaze at them with admiration, comparing them critically with each other and with last year's puppets. Each was an individual because each meant something. They were alive and individual, dangling and dancing above the sea of upturned, rapt, yellow faces.

The houses' fronts and balconies sparkled with lights, were fine with scrolls and carpets, glowed with heavy-scented flowers, were musical with the laughing of gay-clad women. Women and children lounged and leaned between the flower-pots on the gilded balconies.

Musicians, soothsayers, sellers of sweetmeats, and sellers of luck-pictures jostled each other. Sellers of birds and of crickets, of artificial flowers and of steaming gaudy cakes, and of all the tawdry trifles that even the poorest Chinese contrive to buy at festival times, rang their bells, beat their gongs and cried their wares.

Every one was good-natured, festival-clad and chattering happily.

And all this only the aftermath. For Pang Kee and Pang Soo had come late to a waning festivity.

But the boy pushed on to the temple platform at the end of the street, suiting his pace to hers, and Pang Kee followed him.

But the play was done, the actors were gone; attendants were dismantling the stage.

"It was magnificent!" the urchin said regretfully.

Pang Kee grunted, and turned back wearily. Since she had come all the length of the street she, too, regretted not to have seen even a little of the "magnificent" drama. It was years since she had witnessed any theatrical performance.

She looked about her wistfully. But there was no place where she could sit. And she had no mind to buy anything. She shrugged, shifted the heavy sack a little, and began to push and plod back the way she had come.

The boy thrust himself sturdily before her, again making some path for her.

It was tedious going, but considerably easier and quicker because of the boy.

Outside the gate again, Pang Kee bade Shu A-fah farewell and gods-speed. And, anxious as she was now to get to her hut as speedily as her jaded legs would obey her, she lingered a moment to thank the urchin for his piloting of them.

Shu A-fah swept her thanks aside with a deep bow.

"The debt is insignificant Shu A-fah's, honorable mother-one," he insisted politely.

Pang Kee gave him a courteous gesture with a tired and burdened arm, and lingered no longer: home and rest were imperative now for them both. Pang Soo lay sleepily on her shoulder. Pang Kee believed that Pang Soo had gained in weight since their daybreak start.

The boy did not accept dismissal. He trudged quietly

on beside them. Pang Kee was a little uneasy. Was he a thief-boy who, when the way they went was darker and lonelier, would attempt to rob her of the sack he repeatedly had offered to carry for her? Pang Kee gripped the sack tighter. But she doubted if, worn as she was now, she could overpower him, if he chose to wrest it from her. But she could not compel him to leave them. He was as free of the path as they were.

It did not occur to her that his designs, if he had any, were against Pang Soo. Girls are a drug in the Chinese market, even girls in finer clothes than these that Pang Soo wore to-day; especially girls as young as Pang Soo. Comely girls several years older sometimes are roughly kidnaped, and when flower-trained and painted are not without market-value. But, as a rule, it is women who steal them. And no Chinese, not even the worst, will steal a child in the actual presence of its mother, especially a child that still "smells of her milk." Pang Kee no longer suckled Pang Soo, but in Shantung a child of three often is suckled.

Pang Kee went on, hoping at every cross-lane that the boy would turn down it and leave them, growing more and more troubled when he did not. She wished that she had not promised Pang Soo a peep at the City festival! Their next return from the cave should be direct and, she hoped, unseen and unaccompanied.

Again the lad begged to carry the sack.

Pang Kee refused sourly.

He did not leave them.

Where she went he went beside her or followed close.

Pang Kee's heart beat painfully. Her legs ached more and more. The sack grew heavier, and so did Pang Soo.

Before they reached their own hut three narrow lanes crossed this one they were on. The boy did not even look down them.

"Where live you?" Pang Kee demanded at last. There was no other turning before they reached her door; the next house beyond it was a long *li* away, farther than even

a sturdy boy could reach until to-night was almost to-morrow.

"In no where," Shu A-fah replied cheerfully.

The statement did not reassure Pang Kee. If it were true, a homeless derelict-one would snatch at every chance of profit. She wondered if she could buy him off with a very small coin, and looked at him searchingly. It would be terrible to part with one of the two coins she had knotted up in her sleeve in case of some absolute need, but it would be better such sacrifice than to have him wrench the sack from her and dart off with it. He was stronger than she perhaps, certainly swifter of feet. There was no one in sight to whom she could appeal; if there had been, they might have robbed her themselves. If she offered him her precious *dam,* and he accepted it as immunity payment, the sack would be safe from him. No Chinese thief, paid to leave you your own, will break that contract. Almost she wished she had broken her promise to Pang Soo, or had left the treasures she'd found safe in the cave until another day.

She halted a moment—her legs were glad of the respite she gave them—and studied the urchin's lifted face. It looked an honest face, she thought. She was sure that his eyes were kind. Except for his dust-grimed feet, the boy was clean. She noticed how neatly his queue was braided. The boy, who said he was homeless, had self-respect. She would go on a little farther, she decided, before she parted with the *dam,* which was the smaller of the two copper pieces hidden in her sleeve.

"How mean you, you live no where?" she asked as she trudged on again. "Who are your parents? What is your name?"

Most Chinese are voluble. They enjoy talking. Shu A-fah answered the woman fully.

"I call me Shu A-fah; Shu because once when hornets had stung me and I was maddened and swollen—my feet were the worst, they ran with blisters from the hornets' stinging—I came to the pool of Shu Kem close by the

cypress forest on a hill slope, and I bathed in it, holding my feet a long time in the kind and beautiful water, and it soothed me and sucked out the stinging, and I could walk again without weeping. A-fah because once when I had stolen a melon—one steals when one is sufficiently famished—the man who owned the patch of melons came upon me suddenly, and saw me, and would have beaten me, and most surely, too, would have deprived me of my melon. I ran over a deep angry stream, ran on a bridge that was old and was rotten with neglect, a long tree thrown across the stream A-fah, and it broke. I got across just in time. The farmer would not swim after me—he was lame, and wearing a very good petticoat. He must have been a rich farmer. He stood on his bank and cursed me. I squatted on my bank—it was a beautiful bank, all velvet with moss —and ate my melon, and laughed and jibed at him. It was a beautiful melon. But I have had care not to journey to there again." Shu A-fah grinned.

Pang Kee chuckled softly. Femininely illogical, the boy's confession of theft had, in some inexplicable way, convinced her that he would not try to rob her.

"A name for oneself is needful. So, I made me one whose sound I like. And I am grateful to the pool that healed me, and to the bridge that broke. My birth-name I know not, if I was mother-born. Perhaps the sun hatched me out of some egg a godling had made in mischief and left on the sand at Lung Shan. Lung Shan is the first place of which I have memory. And often I feel that the sun is my honorable parents. I greatly love the sun, and it has been father-and-mother-friend to me. It warms me like wine, it clothes me when I have not a coat. It feeds me; for it makes ripe the fruit I often find—wild fruit, most of it," he added hastily—"and when I catch a fish the sun a little cooks it and aids my hungry stomach to enjoy it."

"*Aie!*" Pang Kee agreed. She had cooked and stomached small fish so.

"I tell you, O honorable mother-one, that I live nowhere, because it is true. It is true, because I have no place that is mine for home. I go where I will. I search, sometimes I find. I work when any will hire and pay. When I am wearied, I sit and rest. When I am greatly weary, I sleep. When I hunger, I eat—if I can."

Pang Kee sighed. She knew!

"No man-one will adopt me, since I cannot prove my family-name and of what generation I am, and cannot get relative-permission for adoption."

The woman nodded. The self-named boy could not be adopted, it was clear.

"But I think the gracious Day-star has adopted me," the lad boasted happily. "And Kwan is good! And, truly, I think that he who has no home has many. I better would like that I had *one*. But when I am a man I shall journey far; see much, find much, learn much; pay myself as far as I can for all that fate has robbed and denied me."

For some moments they went on without speaking.

Pang Soo slept.

"Have we far more to go, mother-one?" Shu A-fah questioned presently.

We! Pang Kee sighed, pitying him. She could not adopt him!

"I am the slow burning of a long candle from the hut that is mine," she answered.

Shu A-fah whistled—sympathetically. "A slow-burning long candle, if bought of an honest candle-maker, burns as long as it costs a woman's unbound feet to walk a *li!*" he exclaimed.

"As far as that, a little more far," Pang Kee owned regretfully.

"And you slouch with your weariness! Give me what you carry! Truly I am strong."

Pang Kee hesitated, almost yielding. She was so wearied. The sack had grown unendurably heavy. She believed that she was going to do as the no-home-one bade.

But Pang Soo intervened.

Pang Soo woke and whimpered, saw Shu A-fah and broke off whimpering to laugh. She leaned down from Pang Kee's shoulder, and held out imperative baby arms to Shu A-fah.

"Come thou then, adorable flower," the boy cried. "May I carry her—instead of the sack?" he pleaded to Pang Kee.

And Pang Kee, scarcely hesitating, let him take Pang Soo. He would not steal the girl-child. Pang Soo would be of no service to him, nor could he sell her.

Shu A-fah carried Pang Soo very carefully; carried her more carefully than often a baby is carried even in China, the land of baby-worship. Once or twice he touched the wilted rose with a gentle yellow finger. Once Pang Soo patted his face with her fat baby hand.

They trudged on, not speaking again. But again and again Pang Soo chuckled and laughed.

When they had gone a little farther along the narrow, darkening path, Pang Soo wriggled suddenly in Shu A-fah's arms, and broke their silence insistently.

"Rice!" she commanded imperiously.

"Hush, thou greedy one! Thou hast eaten all thy rice," the mother told her. "And most of mine," Pang Kee might have added.

"Rice!" Pang Soo insisted again.

Shu A-fah, shifting the child a little in his arms, fumbled carefully in his loin-cloth, and brought from it a slab of nut-rich millet-cake.

He offered it eagerly.

Pang Soo accepted it calmly, and promptly fell to.

The fat crumbs she let fall Shu A-fah caught carefully in one up-cupped hand; and when she had finished the rest of the cake he held up his hand, and Pang Soo took and ate every one.

Something told Pang Kee that he had given all of his

own supper—solace against his lonely, roofless sleep-hour—to little Pang Soo.

That is how it began.

CHAPTER X

PANG KEE woke. Pang Soo still slept.

The woman opened her eyes slowly, stretched her legs in the comfortable warmth under the quilts. Why had she slept so late? The Day-star was dappling shreds of gold on the floor. Why had not sleeping washed her clean of the thick clog of yesterday's weariness? Then she remembered—remembered how far she had plodded the day before, how much she had carried. She must go the same journey again before another moon had come and gone. The quarry hidden in the cave was too rich to be neglected. She must sift and garner it—more than once. But she would not journey far to-day.

Pang Kee moved about the hut quietly, that Pang Soo might sleep while she would. Sleep was food and growth to one so young. And Pang Soo could afford to be slothful; Pang Soo had no need to work; she had Pang Kee to work for her.

The sack lay where she had let it fall last night near the door—too footsore and back-bent to unpack or even to hide it. She thrust it out of sight—lest some one came. It was very rarely that any came to Pang Kee's door, but always some one might. Once Zut Qu had come. Zut Qu would not come again. Some other might.

As she got ready their morning "rice"—in which there was no grain of rice—the woman wondered idly where the boy who had come with them to their door last night had slept.

She wished that she had given him food.

On an impulse, when he left them she had—all weary as

she was—taken the little copper *dam* from her sleeve, and had given it to him.

The boy took it, bowed low holding the coin in his palm, and put it back in Pang Kee's hand. "Your worm is already overpaid, very old lady," he had said, "for he is greatly satisfied, happy and full of rich honor that he carried for you the lovely, laughing, tender few-years-one. Kwan give you and her pleasant sleep." And before the woman's astonishment would let her speak Shu A-fah had gone.

He had refused her coin-gift! And he had spared to Pang Soo his only rice! Pang Kee was sure that the cake of nuts and millet had been his all. When had such a gift been refused before by a homeless, foodless boy?

Never before had Pang Kee offered to spare a coin that she was not forced to pay. She knew that it was improbable that she ever would again. A *dam* would buy four eggs and a brick of tea. She was glad now, in the clearer sanity of day, that he had refused that proffered *dam;* and yet—too, she was sorry. And she wished that she had thought to give him a crust.

Pang Soo woke, sat up in the quilts, and giggled amicably.

"Rice!" the child demanded.

And when she had eaten it, and drained the cup of almost hissing water her mother held to her, Pang Soo made an unmaidenly request.

"Boy!" she demanded.

Breakfast Pang Kee had supplied her instantly and eagerly, but Pang Kee was powerless to supply the boy. Pang Soo was angry, and said so with a sulky scream.

Wisely Pang Kee, who had little mind and no learning, but much sense, paid no attention, and went about her business. Defeated, Pang Soo puckered her tiny mouth less crossly, slid off the bed—the great distance down shook her well—crawled across the floor and sat giggling in the

sunlight, playing cat's-cradle with the yellow sunbeams.

And Pang Kee and Pang Soo quite forgot Shu A-fah—until he recalled himself to them.

Twice Pang Kee, with Pang Soo in her arms or toddling beside her, went again to Zut Qu's cave; starting early, returning late, avoiding the City gate. And because of Zut Qu's cave, hidden treasure piled and grew in Pang Kee's hut.

With the growing of her piling store Pang Kee's dreams grew: dreams of white rice hot and savory in her mouth, a good marriage for Pang Soo, and an added dream, a dream of how, when Pang Soo was desirably wedded and she, Pang Kee, had eaten her full of white-white rice, she would just possibly find a way, and its affording, to adopt a son, and so release the ghost of Pang Lee and her own ghost, when she had gone-on, from the endless hell in which sonless, unworshiped ghosts must stay forever.

This new added dream was but a feeble film of thought, too remote of possible fulfilment to occur to her often or ever vividly; a stray thought dismissed and forgotten almost before it came.

But her other dreams gripped her. Her dream of advancement, advantageous marriage for Pang Soo, was with her, if only in the background of her slow thought, constantly. It grew and grew stronger with the growth of the child. Her dream of rice, white rice in her bowl, came intermittently; she gloated over it before she tasted, then it was hot and salt in her ravished mouth. Often her lips trembled and watered. There were moments when she would have sacrificed even the love of Pang Soo for a basin of such rice—or believed that she would.

The word "rice" never brought or suggested her craving. The word "rice" has too wide and multiple a meaning in Chinese. Primarily it means food and meals, eating. "Come to your rice!" is "Come to dinner," "Come and

eat," "Breakfast is ready," "Supper is waiting," "The toads are roasted to a turn." Millions of Chinese use the word so who never have rice in their bowl. Half of China is riceless. But the word serves for twigs and roots in famine times, for wine-washed sea-slugs on the millionaires' banquet tables. "Rice" is the general food of China, the creature sustenance—no matter in what form—of one-quarter of all humanity: the Chinese, as significant in history and character, esthetically and in art as they are significant numerically.

And they share another food, a greater "rice" that has molded and chiseled them, made them what they have been and are, and makes them—while they continue to live by it—their one glowing promise, China's best promise, of persistence and lasting attainment: the first-class food of a first-class race, the true and universal rice of the splendid Chinese people.

And that Rice—from the Great Wall to the China Sea, from Taiwan to Yün-nan Fu, is these: love of Nature, intouchness with Nature—love of flowers, birds, wind in the trees, sunlight, sunset, moonlight and starlight; love of art—music, characters beautifully brushed, verse exquisitely thought and told, love of lovely color, appreciation of beautiful line, reverence of music; filial affection and obedience, ancestor-worship observance, submission to family, realization of the human mind's infinitesimalness, respect for tradition, rites sunnily performed and respected, gratitude for every kindness, peace held higher than war, books and pictures outranking coins, the plow and the rake outranking the implements of human strife; old words stored and reverenced, old precepts obeyed.

This is the Rice that has made China great, that has kept her fine, serene in hunger and torture, invincible in defeat, a people of polish, children of beauty, keeping them under all stress and strain soul-sweet and sane: the Rice that has fed their minds—sage or ignorant—refined and preserved their courtly manners, their sunny good-

humored kindliness; has made them happy, kept them Chinese.

Of this Rice, the supreme food of China, paupered Pang Kee had partaken her share. No one privileged to be born Chinese ever is scanted it, ever need lack it.

Pang Kee the peasant did not know that she had fed on this Rice, but she had; all Chinese do. She could neither read nor write—as we use those verbs—but she read flowers, the many musics of Nature, the splendor of bridges and temples, the language of trees and Shantung crops, and they brushed on her days as she lived them (even as they are inscribed on China's everlasting glorious scroll) many a tiny, beautifully done "character" of endurance, gratitude for small pleasures cordially enjoyed, cordial willingness to toil.

Pang Kee the peasant had little mind, and it was not quick. But she had fineness and strength of soul. She endured and she persisted. She never complained, not even to herself. She carried her cross—it had been heavy at times—in a simple, soldierly way; as a matter of course.

But she winced when her craving clutched her: her craving for rice—white, number-one rice.

To see rice, the cereal rice that is the daily bread of much of South China, as she sometimes did displayed in a city shop, but only the inferior brown rice that grows sparsely and sluggishly here and there in Shantung, never quickened her hungry dreams. Pang Soo's demand, "Rice!" never stirred the mother's craving. It lay deeper than that. It lay, inexplicably seeded, in some twisted inmost crevice of her stunted toil-deformed being, quiet, dumb for the most, but at irregular intervals quick, insistent, gnawing—a maddening quirk of a peasant personality; Pang Kee's only idiosyncrasy, almost her only individuality; a craving that at its worst almost throttled her, made her momentarily selfish—selfish in thought, but never quite strong enough to make her selfish in act. Little Pang Soo was stronger than rice.

CHAPTER XI

SHU A-FAH the homeless came to them proudly when he came back to them.

A week passed, perhaps two—it's difficult to keep track of weeks in a country that has none, whose calendar is divided by moons, the blooming of flowers, the ripening of grains, festivals—some days passed before he came.

He was better clad, he looked better fed. And he put three large eggs on Pang Kee's doorstep, bowed and withdrew.

They proved to be excellent eggs.

A few days later he arrived with a rag full of nuts and a doll.

The doll was small and primitive, but it was not home-made, nor second-hand, nor was it shop-soiled. And it gave Pang Soo ecstasy. She snatched it with a gurgled cry of instant proud ownership. And she gave Shu A-fah the friendliest smile.

One morning when Pang Kee rose from her bed, and lifted Pang Soo off it too, since it was their cooking-stove as well as their bed, and being again a festival day she had promised Pang Soo a pancake for dawn-hour meal, Pang Kee was astonished to see that some hand had pushed a coin under the door, and skilfully over the upstanding sill. It had needed patience and a cleft stick to do that!

Pang Kee had earned coins now and then. Only Zut Qu ever had given her one before. Had a god befriended them at last? But Pang Kee—in spite of the upstanding sill—decided against the god. A god, she thought, would have left a larger coin. She pursed the coin under the floor. The benefactor, god-one or mortal, never disclosed its identity.

Digging out in the rain, Pang Kee shivered—and continued to dig. It was her own patch she dug, just outside

her door. Pang Soo was safe and snug in the hut, nursing her doll, and feeding it extravagantly with industrious pilferings from the drip-pan under the ceiling-hung salt. Pang Soo, being a mother, fed her child first and most, but she fed herself too; Pang Soo would be very thirsty before long.

From where she dug, Pang Kee could watch her hut door, see that nothing to harm Pang Soo entered there. But she could not see Pang Soo, for the door was fast to keep the room the warmer, or Pang Soo would not have been feeding so well—on salt.

"Rest you, mother-one, while you permit me that I dig for you. I am strong. I have dug much."

The woman looked up from her heavy spade.

It was Shu A-fah that, unheard, had come up to her. He made three courtly bows, and held out his hand to take her spade.

Pang Kee drew her sleeve across her sweating face, and went on digging.

"I have no price to hire a laborer," she told him.

"Shu A-fah takes no wage from his friend," the boy who had no home, and had invented his own name, replied. And presently Pang Kee let him have the spade. She was glad to rest awhile. She had been digging for several hours, and digging hard. Her soil was poor; it had to be well dug, if it were to yield even moderately.

Shu A-fah had not boasted his strength more than it was, or his husbandman skill.

Shu A-fah dug, and Pang Kee watched him critically. She was well content to have him dig on; he did it as well as she, it sweated him less; he scarcely breathed heavier while he dug. The woman approved him. But he puzzled her. She disliked being puzzled. Most dense minds do.

"Why do you dig for me?" she demanded sharply.

The boy dug on steadily, and answered her over his shoulder.

"To aid you, honorable mother-one, to aid you to earn rice for the tender flower-one. Sleeps she?"

"I do not understand you," Pang Kee persisted, ignoring his question. "Perform you a vow?"

Shu A-fah laughed scornfully. "I have no time for vows, honorable old-one!" he exclaimed, little foreseeing a vow he would take before long to keep while he lived, little foreseeing the cost it would cost him to keep and to perform.

"Why dig you for me?" she insisted. "Others would pay you; you dig well and fast."

"I need not to earn to-day, mother-one. I ate well yesterday. This little I give you to-day I bring you in friendliness. To-morrow again I will earn. Pu Wei-chi, the money-changer, will give me my rice and a brass, if I toil for him to-morrow. His rice is good, and he heaps his servants' bowls."

A thought stronger than her wish to learn *why* Shu A-fah dug for her without payment sprang in Pang Kee.

"Hast thou ever seen white rice?" she asked breathlessly. It did not occur to her that this fellow poor-one might, by any possibility, ever have tasted white rice. But, since he worked sometimes for rich Pu Wei-chi, was it possible that once, at the edge of a marriage-feast, or at some great festival time, he had seen white rice? To hear of it from one who had seen white rice, the rice that the Son-of-Heaven ate in the Purple Forbidden City, would be much to Pang Kee. Her lip trembled, her eyes were hot with excitement, as she asked again, "Have you ever seen rice—the pearl-white rice that the great ones eat?"

"Not any time," the boy told her carelessly. He never had craved to eat rice. He deemed the foods that Shantung gave, gave freely to such as could pay moderately, exceedingly good; he desired none better.

Pang Kee regarded him disappointedly; her interest in him waned.

A shrill cry came from the hut.

Pang Kee hurried away.

Thirst had found Pang Soo, and had drenched her. Lucky for Pang Soo that it had not scalded her!

Clutching her doll to her she had toddled to the *k'ang*, had stretched up on her naughty toes, clutched at the kettle, and pulled it and its contents on to her and her doll. Pang Soo was drenched, her toy was as wetted; worst of all, Pang Soo had not quenched her salt-given thirst and had scattered all the precious water. Pang Soo was very angry. She shrieked long and long through her embittered salt-crusted mouth.

Pang Kee stripped and comforted Pang Soo, wiped and scraped the salt from Pang Soo's crusting lips, set naked Pang Soo on the cooler end of the *k'ang* to dry, spread Pang Soo's soaked garments and doll on the other end, and went to the bucket to refill the kettle and brew by the *k'ang's* heat more drink for Pang Soo.

And Pang Soo chided that it took so long. Pang Soo was very thirsty indeed, and her thirst increased. Pang Soo was indignant with Pang Kee. Pang Kee was not indignant with Pang Soo.

Many a mother would have been, and would have scolded eloquently. Almost never is a Chinese child struck. The meanest Chinese hand has better to do than to strike a child.

To be without hot water, especially in the house of those who toil in the sweat of their brows and bodies, is the sorest want a Chinese house can know. Hot water is *the* Chinese stimulant, the poultice of Chinese flesh that aches, among peasants the great alleviator of thirst. Those who lack it are friendless indeed.

But it did not occur to Pang Kee to scold Pang Soo, or occur to Pang Soo that Pang Kee might.

Pang Kee hastened to the water-bucket, heavily covered, lest Pang Soo fall in, or lean over and dabble, and dabbling bespatter herself.

Pang Soo continued to cry, more gently now, and to demand, but not so ungraciously; she realized that Pang

Kee was doing her best. And Pang Soo was angry with the kettle rather than with Pang Kee. No matter how the salt-tortured thirst tore and bit, the re-filled kettle had to simmer before Pang Soo could have a drink. They were only peasants, very poor peasants, but—except out of doors, a long way from the nearest house—neither Pang Kee nor her child ever had tasted cold water. Cold water had its uses, but it was not drink.

At sunset Pang Kee went outside again to bring her spade into the hut's safety before it was night.

The spade stood to her hand, thrust near the door.

All the garden patch was dug—beautifully.

Shu A-fah had gone.

Slowly, surely, homeless Shu A-fah won from them what his loneliness craved with craving as sharp as Pang Kee's craving for rice, and less intermittent; established himself as an accepted and trusted human annex of their life. He adopted them both, and served them well.

It was easy enough for him to win his way with Pang Soo. He played with her, he contrived toys for her, he nursed her, and, best to her liking, he obeyed her—intelligently and cheerfully. Pang Soo was a demanding baby. The more she asked, the more eagerly Shu A-fah gave.

To win Pang Kee's entire confidence took longer. But Shu A-fah did.

It became understood that when he left them he would come back again, that when he could he would toil with Pang Kee as a matter of course, that he was Pang Soo's playmate and their friend.

Learning the boy's worth, seeing his strength and health, Pang Kee's unobtainable dream of adopting a son took clearer shape and detail, grew. Sometimes it seemed to her more possibly feasible. The priests could do much. The priests of China are shrewd, and because shrewd reasonable. They are not too hard on the poor. They only ask what they believe you can pay. When you have no gold they

will not refuse your brass. Bribed by much less than a *shoe,* some priest, she thought, would think out some way to twist, and twisted modify to her purpose, the strict rules of adoption.

If she could spare the price!

To give gone-on Pang Lee a son! To have a son to worship at her own grave when it lay at the foot of Pang Lee's!

And how it would joy the homeless boy! How proud and grateful he would be! It was for her sake that she wished and dreamed of it, for Pang Lee's sake and hers, but she was not unwilling to do the boy a kindness that would be a ten-fold greater benefit to herself and Pang Lee.

The boy never lay in Pang Kee's hut, not even in storm time. Pang Kee never knew where he slept. Sometimes they did not see him for days, once or twice not for more than a moon. But gradually he came more often. Sometimes he shared a meal of theirs. But, if he did, he did not come back to the hut until he brought with him for them more than the value of the food Pang Kee had given him. Even when he owed them for no tangible hospitality he very rarely came empty-handed. He contributed, in a sturdy boyish way, to their simple upkeep, and he gave Pang Kee much work. He made and put up another shelf. He fashioned a stool. He made a chest. He mended the roof. He strengthened the door.

He brought Pang Soo a kitten one day. She loved it, and the tiny tailless kitten soon loved Pang Soo.

Pang Kee frowned at the gift, since she dared not—because of Pang Soo's sure displeasure—kill it for food. But she tolerated it, although a little glumly, because Pang Soo received it with rapture, and because the boy assured her that until it could forage for its hungry self he would provide it provender and would do it without any less contribution, either in kind or toil, to theirs.

And when it grew old and ugly it would be a valuable asset. Most of all, the woman tolerated it for that.

Kittens are not esteemed highly in China; lank old cats are. Kittens, except for their fur and their flesh, are useless, and they are given to damage. Old cats keep luck in and keep ill-luck out. Chained at the hut door, in its old age, the kitten-grown-a-cat would be a valuable servant.

Twice Pang Kee went back with careful secrecy to the cave of Zut Qu. No one saw her go, no one saw her come —except Pang Soo. She had to take Pang Soo with her.

The third time that she went back she took Shu A-fah with them.

She left him to play with Pang Soo by the pool under the camphor trees.

She believed that she could have trusted Shu A-fah with the secret of the cave and the treasure it held. She knew that she could trust Shu A-fah to take care of Pang Soo.

She was glad not to take Pang Soo into the cave. A year —nearly two—had passed. Pang Soo, nearly six now, no longer laughed in the cave. It frightened her now.

Pang Kee left Pang Soo with Shu A-fah.

She brought out a heavier sack this time than she ever had before; and she let Shu A-fah carry it most of the way back.

He asked no question. Pang Kee told him nothing. She felt that her secret was safe; that vagrant Shu A-fah would speak to no one of what he saw she did by stealth. Much as he did for them, she too had been kind to Shu A-fah. And they had shared rice. Only an ingrate would betray. It did not cross the peasant's simple mind that Shu A-fah might prove ungrateful.

The first time that Pang Kee returned to the cavern, the brocade she had spread lay flat to the ground. It was held in place as she had fixed it. None had moved it, she was sure. The bones and the powdery flesh had dusted back to

the dust beneath them, that was all, and even the garments the wizard had worn.

Somewhere under the damask covering the great green jewel lay. Ignorant as she was, Pang Kee divined that it was of much value, would enrich her forever, if she could find, as surely she would, a way to dispose of it safely. She had no doubt that it would provide her and to spare: release her forever from toil, dower Pang Soo richly. It takes so little to make a Chinese rich! Whom could not Pang Soo wed, when her feet were bound, expensively, beautifully squeezed, so dowered, so lovely of face? It would give the price and more to pay the priest to arrange with the gods the adoption of Shu A-fah, buy her a costly coffin, an elegant funeral, buy her rice! White rice such as the Emperor ate; rice not to taste but once, rice to eat every day high-piled in her bowl! Pang Kee's mouth ran.

But she would not take the emerald.

She could not despoil the dead, who when living had so befriended her.

All else here she felt hers by legitimate heirship. She believed that Zut Qu wished her to take, commanded her to take and to use. But what had been worn on the living flesh of great Zut Qu when the soul of Zut Qu had mounted the Dragon, uncouth Pang Kee the needy peasant could not take from the shivered dust that had been living Zut Qu.

But all else she would take, little by little, as she could; all but the shrouding damask pall and the worship-candles on their costly sticks. Again and again she would come and choose and take. She would need to come many times.

But always the stone of green should hide its flashing under the shroud-cloth of old Zut Qu.

Each time she went to the cave Pang Kee came earlier, lingered longer, chose more slowly and carefully.

But always when she came she *k'o-towed,* lit incense and candles, knelt and prayed. And when she was ready to go,

knelt again beside the still-lit candles and worshiped and prayed, prayed long, rose slowly, went slowly, *k'o-towed* at the door.

And each time she came she brought a handful of flowers—when tiny wild ones cluttered the waysides, when flowers were scarce and dear in the market-place—and scattered them above the dust of Zut Qu.

And the once she found a crystal flask of scent so maddeningly sweet that, when she pulled out the stopper, the perfume intoxicated her deliciously, Pang Kee, thinking how the smell would delight Pang Soo, poured the perfume over the resting dust of Zut Qu.

CHAPTER XII

THEY were resting at the edge of the melon-patch. Their toil for to-day was done. A long hour of day was left them. But since it was a saint's day—(there are "saints" in China, and saints' days are kept)—and since she and Shu A-fah had worked tremendously since before dawn, Pang Kee had decreed that for an hour they would make holiday.

Even Pang Soo had worked to-day. Pang Soo had not overworked; Pang Kee, increasingly ambitious for Pang Soo, was increasingly mindful of the child's soft body and growing beauty.

They all were tired. Pang Soo was sleepy.

It was the Snake-moon, high time that the vines were in, if they were to be heavy with melons when the next Water-lily-moon came. And thanks to Shu A-fah all the vines the patch would hold and allow to spread and thrive were in and established.

Shu A-fah was only pleasantly tired, scarcely knew he was tired, because he was so proud of the melon-patch. He had created it, his gift to them, the women he loved, the baby-one who had kept his red rose all day long and crept

into his heart when she did, never to leave it again, and the mother-one who inch by slow inch had let him come a little nearer to her, until now he had his place at her girdle, a place of friendship and trust, almost the place of a son. He had given her much: a hand at her arm when her arm was weary, the splendid brawn of his sturdy strength, thoughtfulness, unfailing cheerful respect.

To imperious Pang Soo he had given more. He was her playmate, her watch-dog, her slave. Neither father nor bridegroom ever loved a girl more dearly than the worshiping peasant boy loved the saucy peasant baby, tiny peasant Pang Soo, hut-born, coarse-fed, who by Nature's freak had the look of a human lily, a princess born and kept.

And he counted himself overpaid that they granted him to be near them and to serve them. And who can deny that he was well paid? We have it on great authority that he is well paid that is well satisfied.

Pang Kee appreciated Shu A-fah. Her limited peasant mind, sharpened by poverty, was sharp concerning all that contributed to their livelihood. Pang Soo regarded him hers.

When the cool of the after-sunset hour fell, and its darkness, they would go into the hut, and sit in the warmth of the *k'ang*, and Shu A-fah would prepare their simple meal. He could cook better than Pang Kee could now. And she would watch him while he did it, bidding him sharply to be mindful, spill not a grain of salt, be more sparing of the spice—spice cost much.

And when they had eaten, Shu A-fah would make them music. His little tin music-pipe never was far from Shu A-fah. He loved it. They loved to hear it. And it cost no light.

There would be no twilight to tempt them to linger after the sunset's going. There is no twilight in China—none in the East; it is day until it is night; light and

darkness meet but do not greet; in less than one breath day has gone, night has come.

"When their ripeness has come, they will be very good melons," the boy said a little boastfully. His boyish boasting was not unpardonable.

He had rented the half *mow* of stony soil from Ma Kip the carpenter, who owned it, paying the rent with sturdy service and promise of more. He had rented it for an almost nothing, the tiny corner of stone-spoiled land at the side of Pang Kee's very small garden. Three days he had toiled for Ma Kip in prepayment for a year. Each year that he did that the bit of rock-infested earth was to be his. Ma Kip was an upright man, he would keep the bond.

The bond had been made between them two years ago. Foot by foot Shu A-fah had cleared the spot, freed it of ruts and stones. It had been a strenuous task that might have bested a strong man. It had not bested Shu A-fah. He'd had no need to clear it of weeds, none would grow in the unfertile shallow dust. He cleared it of rubbish and refuse—rubbish and refuse utterly useless, or it would have been found and taken long ago. He had had to carry it and dump it wherever he dared. He had brought barrow-load after barrow-load of rich earth—procured as best he could—and had spread it thickly over his rented land. He had enriched it again and again with the precious night-soil that is an important and cherished adjunct of Chinese agriculture. He had manured it with dung and the bones and skins of a thousand fish. At last he had sown and planted it, seed by seed, just-started vine by vine. There were seeds in it he had bought, shrewdly and cheaply, and this was true of the plants. Regrettably he had stolen more seeds and more rooted plants than he had bought. It's a dangerous industry to steal any growing thing in Shantung. The scarecrows that speckle grotesquely the farms and garden patches serve to deter birds and small maraud-

ing beasts—sometimes—but hold no peril over men and boys. Therefore farmers and owners of fruitful fields make human watch and ward over their growing crops. They shoot, and their aim is good. Many a toothless crone, deputed to watch melon-patch or cotton-field, too old to be of much use on her legs, or in the house, can shoot her arrow straight. And she can scream as only the devils of hell can scream; and when she screams the men of her kindred rush from their sleep-mats swiftly and armed, if only armed with terrible iron-spiked sticks. It needs courage to steal growing food in hungry Shantung, it takes skill and luck to pull the plunder off. Shu A-fah was proud of all he'd bought, he was prouder of what he had thieved. It takes more courage and more skill to steal, in China, than it does to be honest. And he had stolen for them.

Until to-day all that was accomplished here, the boy had done. To-day, lacking other work, Pang Kee had helped him, he watching that hers was the lighter toil. And when it had pleased her Pang Soo had trotted between them importantly, carrying a trowel, bringing the string. They both had been watching that all she did was easy. They need not have watched it; Pang Soo saw well to her own ease and convenience always.

And now the work was done. There was no more to do except to guard well the fruit as it ripened, to keep the vines weeded, fed and watered, until then.

"I like melons," Shu A-fah said.

Pang Kee grinned. He had made a needless statement. All Chinese like melons.

"We have six sorts," Shu A-fah boasted. "Early in the first Melon-moon some will ripen. Others will be sweet and spicy for our eating when the first of two-coat weather stings us. From the first we eat, until our last one ripens, we shall not lack a melon."

Pang Soo smacked her lips, laughed applauding him.

"*Aie,* I can taste them now. Can you taste them, mother-one?"

"Not yet," Pang Kee said. "But it is good to know that they will ripen for our eating when the moons are hot and make us thirst."

"*Aie!* I crave melons always. You, too, mother-one?"

Pang Kee bit a twisting lip. Her brown face stiffened a little.

"No—not the delicious melons. But I crave, Shu A-fah —with a craving that will not be stilled, that is hard to carry. Have you never craved rice, Shu A-fah, white rice to eat?"

"I like millet. I like the food I get."

"All my life I have craved rice—white rice!" Pang Kee's eyes were hungry. "It comes and goes. I thank our gods that it goes, leaving me in peace, until it comes again. It is torment when I crave. Yet—but yet—it is ecstasy to dream that before I mount the Dragon I shall know the taste of rice—best rice, white!"

"Perhaps you would not like it," Shu A-fah ventured. "One who has traveled far, and with coins in his pouch, told me that even the costliest rice, the white rice of Hankow, has a thin and inferior flavor," Shu A-fah lied, hoping to damp Pang Kee's longing. He was persuaded that it never could be gratified.

Pang Kee turned on him furiously, spat towards him in contempt and anger. She called him wicked names. "Worm" was the kindest thing she called him.

"Not the pomegranates of On High have such heaven's flavor. White rice is the dinner of the gods. The Son-of-Heaven eats it, with jeweled chop-sticks in the Forbidden City. If I had white rice to eat once, I should be a god-one while I ate. And the memory of its flavor, lingering in my grateful mouth, would make all my after-eating delicious and delicate, no matter what—mildewed millet, water that was cold, unripened eggs." Her voice cracked in her anger; Shu A-fah had profaned her dream.

The boy bowed his head, dropped his eyes and waited until the woman's fury had spent itself, railed itself to quiet and restored friendliness as it always did. But he never had seen her as angered as this before. He had hurt her! And his attempt had been to alleviate.

Presently she moved a little nearer, put her hand on his leg. That she did, told her greatly moved. Chinese do not needlessly touch each other, not even the uncouthest peasants.

"Shu A-fah," she pleaded, "tell me of him, tell me of the man who has eaten rice, white rice, and told you of it!"

Pang Soo yawned.

Shu A-fah did his best, invented carefully, carefulest of all to say that the man, met but the once and by chance, had traveled on, far from Shantung, as far as Peking, Shu A-fah believed.

Pang Kee listened gluttonously, asked a score of questions. Many of them embarrassed quite uninformed Shu A-fah. He had heard of rice, even he had seen the poor, brown rice of their Province, so sear that almost the hungry mice hesitated to eat it. But he had not tasted it. He knew how and where it grew, for the boy wandered far at times—though less often now—and he was inquisitive. He was glad that he had seen it growing. That helped! Helped him to describe to Pang Kee the paddy growing in the South. He knew that there was white rice, smooth like silk, sweeter than red-fleshed peaches, iridescent as the oyster-shell's lining, cream-white as new ivory, elegantly shaped as pear-shaped pearls; all this he had gathered from a story-teller recounting a classic Chinese love story in the market-place. But most of Pang Kee's questions he could not satisfy.

She fell again into fury and fierce upbraiding.

Pang Soo fell asleep, comfortably between them.

Shu A-fah moved softly between her and the sun's hot sinking, guarding her shut eyes from its merciless intrusion. Again the woman softened.

Speaking softly, not to wake the child, Pang Kee spoke to Shu A-fah more intimately than she ever had before. She told him of herself as she never had told any one before—haltingly, dully at first, then finding words by the very lash of her need of self-expression, spread out her memories for him, told him, the little clearly that she could define and formulate it, of her curious rice-hunger, her dream ruthless, recurrent and persistent, hopeless, tormenting.

And the boy listened to her reverently, understanding but little.

How could Shu A-fah understand?

Pang Kee herself did not. She knew that the rice-dream that came to mock and scourge her was an actual ache and itch of flesh. She did not know that, too, it was a social craving, a social ambition. Was it, too, atavism? What was it? Only a great physician could have made an intelligent guess. And he might have guessed wrong.

But this much the Chinese boy understood: her craving pointed a need; a something that must be fed before it could be starved, gratified before it could be killed, before it would leave her in peace.

"I do not remember when I first longed for rice," Pang Kee said sadly. "I feel that I always have, that it was born with me. Sometimes when I sleep I dream that I hold a bowl of rice on my knee. As I lift it to my mouth a hand snatches it away, or the basin falls to the ground with a crash, and I wake."

A boy's black eyes grayed with tears.

"And I never shall eat rice! That I know when I am sane. But as long as I live, I shall long. Twice I have saved, I think, enough to buy a small cupful of rice—fine, white rice, a spoonful perhaps. I know not the price. A large spoonful would satisfy me, I think. But I shall never know. Twice I have had the price, if it costs not more than I can believe. Each time I have spent it for an other thing. I think that I never shall eat rice."

Shu A-fah stared into the sunset with brimming, brooding eyes. He knew what Pang Kee did not know she had told. A year ago in the Pepper-moon Pang Soo had ailed. Pang Kee had gone to the temple to pray, and had bought health for Pang Soo from the priests. That was once. A fortune-teller had predicted great estate for Pang Soo if she were taught what the courtyard girls are taught. Pang Kee had gone to the city, found a teacher of music, one of deportment, and twice in each moon ever since Pang Soo had gone—in her mother's patient arms part of the way, for the way was long, and rough—to the city gate; and in the city had been taught—when she would. Pang Soo was quick, not peasant-slow. She learned as quickly as any courtyard child. Often she would not be taught, and the lesson-price was wasted. Pang Kee had paid for many lessons, paid before the teachers would "book" the peasant pupil, or give her their first teaching. That was twice.

And now Pang Kee was saving hard—denying Pang Soo nothing, denying herself all that she could. Shu A-fah believed that the woman saved for the squeezing of Pang Soo's feet. The time was near when Pang Soo's feet must be bound, if that crowning beauty was to be added to her flower-like loveliness.

Pang Soo stirred, stretched, and waking, laughed.

"Mother-one," she crooned, "I will give you rice!"

"Kwan!" Pang Kee cried, believing that Pang Soo had been powered to hear in her sleep.

Shu A-fah sensed that the little child had been half awake, half listening for some moments.

"The night has come," he said, rising, gathering up his farm tools.

Pang Kee rose heavily, and lifted Pang Soo into her arms.

"Give me melon!" Pang Soo commanded. "Pang Soo wishes a melon."

"When melon-time comes!" the mother promised gravely.

Pang Soo was not satisfied.

"Now!" she insisted.

"At the Melon-moon!" Shu A-fah told her sternly.

Pang Soo pouted. Displeased with him, who never had spoken to her sternly before, she gave him a dark look and ignored him.

They went towards the hut.

Pang Soo dimpled up at Pang Kee.

"Pang Soo will buy you rice," she promised. "Pang Soo and Kwan will!"

As they opened the door the sunset's last javelin splintered on the abacus.

The great kettle was hissing on the *k'ang*.

CHAPTER XIII

PANG SOO was selfish, but she loved her mother. Pang Kee and Shu A-fah had made her selfish. It lay at their door.

Pang Soo loved her mother more than a mother so self-sacrificing often is loved, more than a mother so unwisely unselfish deserves to be loved. She was doing the child disservice in sparing the girl's stronger hands a fair share of the work of their peasant home, denying the strong young shoulders any share of the burdens to which peasant women must grow accustomed in northern Shantung, work and burdens which Pang Soo was sure to know before long unless life dealt her a miracle; which was what Pang Kee intended and schemed life to do. The infatuated mother meant to find a way and to bring it about, and she was fitting Pang Soo for the cushioned life that already the mother had dreamed and willed before the daughter left her breast. Pang Soo's hands must be soft and smooth. Pang Soo's back must be dimpled and straight; her lips never drawn, her laugh never dulled by a care.

Whether the marriage miracle that Pang Kee had planned

—and that, knowing that she did, even now Shu A-fah resented and planned to thwart—would befall or not, a very beautiful miracle did, and luckily the mother's love that might have ruined the girl saved her from the coarsening and poisoning of soul it might have wrought. From the first Pang Soo realized and appreciated the love her mother gave her, and returned it. To please her mother she often was diligent in learning what she knew her mother had paid so much to have her taught. Shu A-fah, much as he loved his pretty playmate, thought the lessons absurd, the lesson coins squandered. But Pang Kee ruled. Stolid, for a Chinese a little stupid, class-bound, in all that concerned Pang Soo Pang Kee ruled absolutely.

Pang Soo was neither stolid nor stupid—and no more class-bound than the delicate wild lemon lilies blooming profusely by the camphor-groves were peasant-ones in the kingdom of the flowers. She took what Pang Kee gave, allowed all that Pang Kee did, but the growing girl observed and thought. Even she obeyed, without seeming to, and she had a plan of her own, a plan to shift presently the weight and toil of life from her mother to herself.

When Pang Soo's feet were bound she bore it patiently for her mother's sake. The child was vain. She knew that she was beautiful, believed that she was more beautiful than she was. Small wonder, for Pang Kee had drummed it into the daughter's tiny coral-tinted ears ever since they could hear, and Shu A-fah's eyes had said it, said it clearer even than foolish Pang Kee said it. But Pang Soo hated, resented pain, and she dearly liked to scamper untrammeled where she would. Of her own will she would not have given her pretty flower-like toes to the cruel bending back. But, knowing how Pang Kee wished it, Pang Soo yielded placidly, and bore the torture with a fortitude that amazed Shu A-fah.

Pang Soo was eight. The best binder came from the city; came every few days to Pang Kee's hut, until the binding of Pang Soo's feet was finished. All that could

ease the horrid pain was heaped to Pang Soo: ointments, opium in a tiny silver pipe; peace-charms, music—it cost Pang Kee a bankrupting price. Most that she had hoarded went for the binding of Pang Soo's feet, the making of the girl's perfect golden lilies. And Pang Kee sat beside her and nursed her hands, wincing at the pain, wincing with the old craving that had come, as it usually did at a time of strain. And Pang Kee did not grudge the price. She could save again. Valiantly she did. And she went oftener to the cave of Zut Qu, perforce bringing lighter booty of less bulk when she came back than she had when Shu A-fah carried the sacks. For she went alone, leaving A-fah to soothe and amuse still crippled Pang Soo, whose sore and sensitive feet forbade her being carried yet.

The melons were ripe.

Shu A-fah carried Pang Soo that far, for she would not be denied. He carried her with infinite care, not jostling or jarring her once, kneeling down very slowly to place her quite gently among the sun-drenched melons.

Pang Soo looked about her, cautious not to move her feet, found the melon she wished, and pointed it out with a gesture of command.

Shu A-fah went and plucked it carefully, and brought it to her.

The orange and russet rind was deeply corrugated. The little fruit was powerfully pungent.

Squatting down beside her, he broke it open with his hands. The sun already had cracked it for him. It is then that such melons are at perfection.

The green-fleshed, deep-red-seeded melon smelt nectar.

Pang Soo ate slowly, less greedily than the boy often had seen her when her food was delicious. There was a far-away look in her eyes; she was thinking more of something else than she was of her melon.

"Shu A-fah bows to you low for what thing you think."

"Mother."

Shu A-fah was not surprised. When they were alone,

Pang Soo often talked about her mother. He knew better than either of them did how much Pang Soo cared for Pang Kee, how strong Pang Kee's influence over Pang Soo was. He approved, of course, but he was a little jealous at times. And he knew that he was. Shu A-fah had few delusions about himself. He was thoughtful, observant; a quiet boy who rarely said much. The triple partnership was largely woman-run, and predominantly woman-voiced.

It were long to tell half that Pang Kee did for Pang Soo, long to tell what the Chinese peasant-woman endured for her child. But Shu A-fah saw and understood. And he reverenced Pang Kee for it. But he longed to do as much for the little lily-one, to serve her as well and loyally. That it seemed impossible that he ever should, hurt him. And sometimes he was jealous of the great mother-love that claimed and gave Pang Kee the first place in Pang Soo's guarded life.

Pang Soo, scrupulously careful not to jar her feet, tilted her dainty head far back, that not a drop of the melon's nectar-juice should drip from her red lips and be lost, finished the melon slowly, put down the thin-left rind reluctantly. She would choose another melon by-and-by; she couldn't manage another one now.

Then she answered him.

"Do you remember, Shu A-fah, the day we finished our long toil of making ready and planting this our elegant melon-patch"—Shu A-fah checked a tender smile—"how, when I slept, the dear mother-one told you of her longing for rice?"

"I remember it well."

"It haunts me, Shu A-fah. It has haunted me ever since. It came to me a shock that Pang Kee my mother-one had a thing she did not share with me, even a fancy to eat of a strange grain she has not tasted, kept from me a thought, had a wish that was not for me, a thought for even a small pleasure of her own."

"Every one who lives has that—a something of their own, a wish for self."

Pang Soo paid no attention to what Shu A-fah said. It was not her way to heed.

"It stung me! After, I was glad. I am glad that she desires a thing for herself. Rice! I will get my mother-one much rice."

"How?"

"I do not know. I will learn. Pang Kee longs for rice. Pang Soo will give her rice!"

"Only a cupful—even a spoonful, she said," Shu A-fah reminded her.

"Better so than none! But I would give her much rice. A spoonful may crave her for more."

"True!" the boy said anxiously.

"Did you ever eat a melon, Shu A-fah, without as you finished it planning to eat your next one? I never have."

The boy owned that it often was so with him. "If they are small melons," he qualified.

"You have a mean stomach, Shu A-fah. Mine is a great one. A big melon, the biggest melon, leaves me hungry for my next. I like my honorable stomach, Shu A-fah. Because it is big, my mind that dwells in it is big and strong, can think quicker than yours can, much quicker than can the mind of Pang Kee."

Shu A-fah did not dispute her. He never had thought about it; but, now that Pang Soo had said it, he realized that it was so.

"There are many melons here," he said joyously. "Each day more ones will ripen."

"I will eat that one to-morrow." She pointed to a smooth, striped monster, a yellow-fleshed watermelon. "I will eat that little crinkled beauty red one now. Get it."

Shu A-fah obeyed.

When he had opened it for her, Pang Soo was gracious and gave him half; she gave him the larger piece. But Shu A-fah would not have it so. He made her change.

Pang Soo laughed at him contentedly. "You are not like your stomach; you are not mean, Shu A-fah," she told him approvingly.

"I can show meanness," he said; "it is a duty of the poor. But never to you shall I have meanness—to you or to Pang Kee."

"So!" the girl said carelessly. She believed him. No need to make words over it. She devoured her pink-fleshed melon slowly, eking out its deliciousness. The flesh was like crisp cream with a flavor of mingled cinnamon and pomegranate.

"Once," she had finished the melon at last, "when I was years less old, I heard her mutter of rice in her sleep. I did not heed it then. But it comes back to me now. Other times come back, small words she has spoken. She has wanted it much. Oh!"

Her exclamation was a cry of pain, and Shu A-fah saw her wince. It hurt him.

"Shall I lift you, and put you an easier way?" he whispered.

"They hurt!" the girl said shortly. "And the price of them must be enough to buy a tubful of rice!" She looked at her throbbing feet contemptuously. "Rice to have heaped her eat-bowl for many a moon! Does rice cost much, Shu A-fah?"

"I cannot answer," the boy owned.

"Find out," the girl demanded.

"I will find out."

They talked a long time about rice. Where did it grow? How could it be found and had? What would it cost? That was most important of all. The length and breadth of China meant nothing to the peasant children. The perils and difficulties of journeying meant little more. When any spot one wished to reach, one started and went, walked to it; that was all. Lucky Shu A-fah had journeyed short journeys on boats; friendly lifts on barrows had been given them both; not often or far. But the only

locomotion they really knew, or could contemplate, was their feet.

Pang Soo and Shu A-fah sat a long time at the edge of the melon-patch, discussing rice, canvassing ways and means, planning quaint childish plans, knitting their little brows, twisting and urging their young minds. It was an endless, fascinating theme; so engrossed them that when the melon was fleshless they nibbled the rind and did not find it hard or bitter, ate it all, and didn't know the difference.

Chinese peasants as poor as these do not throw away melon rind. Hungry, they are glad to eat it. And it has several other uses. Almost *nothing* is thrown away in China.

But when these two shared a melon, as a rule Pang Soo ate most of the flesh and Shu A-fah ate all of the rind. To-day, thinking of other things, spoiled Pang Soo shared the rind.

Shu A-fah gathered the seeds, hers and his, into a great leaf, presently to spread them in the sun, to dry and ripen them for their winter feasting.

Pang Soo laughed, pointed down at her bandaged, crippled feet.

Shu A-fah looked a question.

"They may buy me rice for her, give me the much-little price."

Shu A-fah winced and flushed.

He had suspected why Pang Kee had had Pang Soo's feet squeezed, but he had thrust it from him. He had not supposed that Pang Soo knew. He wished that he dared unbind her feet.

"Pang Soo," he said earnestly, "forget the rice; trouble not more of it. I will get rice for Pang Kee. When I have the years of a man I will go and seek and find and bring back rice, elegant white rice, to honorable Pang Kee."

"You shall not!" Pang Soo forbade furiously. "You are a dull-one. Keep you to dull tasks. Are you a god?

You are not, Shu A-fah! Nameless-one whom we have befriended! You presume. You are a slow-one. Think you, Pang Kee wishes rice sprinkled over her grave? She craves rice to eat, while she lives here in her honorable body of flesh."

"I will give rice to her before she goes On High," the boy said gently. "Pang Kee shall eat rice before much years. When I first am a man I will go and seek rice for her, and come not back until I have found. I will seek rice for good Pang Kee."

Pang Soo's face twisted with anger. Her voice was harsh with fury.

"Seek then!" she cried contemptuously. "Seek then! *I* will *get* rice for her!"

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN the melons had ripened Pang Kee went for the last time to the cave of Zut Qu.

She did not plan that she would not go again. She had no premonition that she could not go again. But because she feared to go often, lest she were seen and followed, and so impoverished of her secret and of the cave-wealth which she had come to think of as her own, she intended to bring away to-morrow more than she ever had before.

She would need Shu A-fah's help; the only help she could trust. She would not leave Pang Soo alone in the hut; nor would Shu A-fah have consented that she did. She must go alone, or they three must go. It was decided that they all should go.

They would start before dawn, fewer would see them then; luckily, none. They would start to return at sunset, keeping in the shelter of the waysides' dark when they reached the city's outskirts, reach home—they hoped unheard and unseen—in the black of night. If no one saw them start, and no one saw them reach the hut again, the

few they might pass on the way would pay little attention to them.

They lay down earlier than their early usual; to store rest and strength for the long double journey and for the heavy work that the woman and the boy would share in the cave. Pang Kee intended to leave the cave as emptied as she could when they started back to-morrow in the hour-of-the-cock. She did not know that the best the cave held, all that would sell for much, still was there. But she knew that there was much; much more than she and Shu A-fah together could carry. She planned to make as nearly clearance as she could to-morrow.

Because Pang Soo must go with them, and because there was so much for them to bring from the cave, they were taking a wheelbarrow. It would make their going slower —the barrow was rough, a home-made one that had cost Shu A-fah long, persistent toil. It did not run very smoothly, and—unlike most Chinese wheelbarrows—it was not easy to push. But Pang Soo could ride in it, sparing her feet, tender still though they no longer pained her—and they could pack the heaviest of their booty in it.

The barrow was ready. Their food for the day already was in it.

They ate amply before they lay down to sleep. Daylight had not entirely gone when the woman and Shu A-fah fell asleep. Pang Soo was restless with excitement. And she was not as weary as they were. She had not worked as hard as they had all day. Sleep did not come to her so soon, but it came at last.

Pang Kee and the child lay in the hut. Shu A-fah slept under the barrow outside the door. No one could move the wheelbarrow without waking him. He looked at the sky searchingly as he wrapped a sack for coarse quilt about him, tucking a stone under his neck for pillow. The boy's eyes were a little apprehensive as he studied the sky. He never before had seen the sky look quite as it did to-night.

It looked steel, and yet shrouded; sullen, ominous, enraged. But there was neither sound nor wind. He was very tired. His eyelids fell—in spite of the fury-look of the sky—and he slept.

They slept sound.

But each dreamed. Toil-drugged Chinese peasants are not apt to dream. Probably they all had over-eaten—foolishly believing that it was easier to carry food so than too much of it in the barrow. Certainly they had eaten unusual weight and bulk. They slept heavily, but they slept ill. Their dreams were dreams of trouble.

The boy dreamt of storm: shrill squall, terrible thunder. Once he dreamed that the hut against which he lay was falling down on him.

Pang Soo dreamed that she sat alone terrified in a tempest-tossed boat, beaten by lashing spray, threatened by jagged rocks. She sobbed to her mother and to Shu A-fah to come to her. But no help came. The rock-broken boat turned over; she was alone in the hissing, sucking water; she was drowning, dying in agony, and her fear was more than her pain. But, wrenching herself from the murderous jaws of the devouring water, she must have thrown herself into an easier position, at a more comfortable angle, for the dream faded, and she slept peacefully.

Pang Kee dreamed that wild beasts were prowling about the hut, wrangling and storming against each other. She dreamt of thunder heavier than she ever had heard. The wild beasts screamed. The storm broke in a furious downpour of rice. She knew it was rice, unlike though it was to the little rice she ever had seen. She was terribly afraid of it, and she fought it off from her face with hands that shook; but it found her face, cut through her thin trembling fingers, scratched and tore her face, blinded her. It was almost dawn when she woke, woke with a troubled cry of "Rice!"

She opened the door.

Shu A-fah already was stirring.

The sky was tranquil with stars. They could pick their way with care by the light the stars gave.

Reluctantly Pang Kee woke the child.

And when they had drunk their basins of almost boiling water, Shu A-fah padlocked the hut door, and they started, Shu A-fah wheeling the barrow in which Pang Soo sat throned on sacks; stones, just of Pang Soo's weight, on the barrow's other side to balance it, or the boy could not have wheeled it.

Shu A-fah had begged Pang Kee to share Pang Soo's "carriage." But Pang Kee had refused, and he could not persuade her. If she had ridden, too, although not all the stones now in would have been needed, some of them must have been put into the child's side of the barrow; a Chinese wheelbarrow must be perfectly balanced, or it either tips over, spilling its contents, or else it refuses as firmly to move as a wilful mule, and even more persistently. Every pound added to a wheelbarrow's luggage, human or other, adds to the barrow-man's toil. Pang Kee would not ride. She wanted all possible of Shu A-fah's strength for what was to do at the cave of Zut Qu.

Pang Soo rode—presently she slept again; Pang Kee walked; Shu A-fah trudged and pushed.

Their going was slow. The way was rough. Shu A-fah was an inferior barrow-man. Chinese wheelbarrow wheeling *and steering* is an art apart, not to be picked up readily. For the most it is an inherited craft. Like most Chinese industries it descends from father to son as it has for thousands of years. The lay hand can acquire it only approximately, with much sweat, strain, difficulty. They went very slowly.

They met no one.

Pang Kee was glad that they did not, but she was mildly surprised. It was unusual to go so far in this part of Shantung without meeting a human creature—not even an animal. The Province is full of people. And the sun was

up now. Pang Kee was surprised, but she gave it little thought. For a Chinese, the woman was dense, and her thought was all on her errand.

Shu A-fah did not even notice it. His mind, only a moderate Chinese mind, was all on his job; *it* strained him to the exclusion of all else, the exclusion of everything that did not at the time closely and pressingly concern him.

Pang Soo alternately slept and woke; woke to laugh and chatter and sing. Because no one was in sight, her mother did not attempt to check her. And, if they did meet any one, they were no more apt to be molested because the girl on the barrow was happy and gently noisy. And, no matter how many they met, no one was apt to molest them. It was not molestation that Pang Kee feared, but curiosity. She did not care greatly who saw them, provided only strangers did, when they were half a *li* from their home and still were half a *li* from Zut Qu's cave.

They might have gone on without eating, though Pang Soo would have clamored imperatively if they had, but drink and rest were unavoidable, if they were to reach their goal.

When they halted to eat and rest Shu A-fah looked searchingly at the sky. The sky was odd. It must be late in the hour-of-the-dragon now! There was no life in the sky, not a cloud. Not a cloud, yet no show of the sun! Shu A-fah wondered, munched his millet-cake frowningly, lit his pipe anxiously.

The hour-of-the-serpent was gone when an ugly rumble of thunder startled them all; startled them not because it was heaviest thunder—thunder is a commonplace of Shantung, though this was not a thunder moon—but because the heavy thunder-bolting seemed to be not up in the sky but deep down in the belly of the earth.

Shu A-fah frowned and looked at Pang Kee.

Pang Kee shrugged and looked at Shu A-fah.

"It is far—far," the woman told him.

Pang Soo giggled.

The boy plodded on, the woman close behind him.

Presently the sky grew rather lighter, a little more normal.

Pang Kee and Shu A-fah both sighed with relief.

Pang Soo cuddled down in her sacks and dozed again.

The little autumn wild flowers seemed to shrink on their tiny stalks.

There was taste of sulphur in the heavy, sullen air. The boy and the woman were panting. Pang Soo stirred uneasily in her sleep. It was an awkward bend in the pathless road, uphill, difficult, awkward to halt in, but Shu A-fah let down the barrow, managed to secure it—stones for brakes—and moved Pang Soo into a more comfortable position, moving her so gently that she did not wake. They went on, after some struggle between boy and barrow. And Pang Soo smiled happily in her sleep.

They plodded on.

Sometimes the way was narrow, sometimes it was wide. Always it was rough. For the most it was dark—even at noon—lonely, forbidding.

Once a terrible cry, the angered cry of many tortured demons, attacked them and mocked them menacingly; a cry not from the shrinking bamboos about them, not from the stifled air above. It sounded to come from deep down in the tormented earth.

The boy and the woman looked at each other without losing step. Pang Kee shrugged. They plodded on.

The earthquake was many, many *li* away, Pang Kee was sure. All the way they had come there had been no rent in the ground, the City Wall had stood unbent and unbroken when they had seen it in the distance; the few farm houses and wayside huts they had passed had worn their roofs.

Here and there the wild white roses were sheets of snow, patching the day with thick perfume. For summer comes late and lingers late in northern Shantung. Still in the last of the Melon-moon, the scent of wild white roses was

thick and heavy in the motionless air. The sparse trees stood unbent and unbroken.

The fury of the earthquake could not be near.

If it were, as safe here as anywhere. What would be would be, the gods decreed.

The walls of the cavern were thick, impregnable; safe if there were safety in Shantung in the hour of earthquake. Pang Kee longed to reach gone Zut Qu's stone lair.

"Go! Go!" she urged Shu A-fah.

They plodded on.

They scarcely spoke to each other. Pang Kee had nothing to say. Shu A-fah needed his breath. Pang Soo sang to herself the little she woke. Most of the time she dozed; the sulphurous day was drowsy. It oppressed the trudging woman and boy, blanketed them with irresistible depression. But twice Pang Soo laughed as she slept.

And they plodded doggedly on.

At last the gloom lifted weakly. Day peeped sullenly "through the blanket of the dark."

When they reached the tiny pool where Pang Soo once had waded naughtily shreds of actual sunlight came through the autumn-red trees, and dappled the quiet water with gold.

They rested and ate, drank from the pool—wishing the drink it gave were warmer, and Pang Kee and Shu A-fah lit their pipes. While they squatted smoking, Pang Soo tore a bouquet of wild red lilies up from the moss, and buried her tiny nose in the fragrant, tiny flowers.

But to-day she did not wade in the cool green pool. Her feet still ached; she might not unbind them.

When they had been here before it had seemed a tranquil oasis of welcome rest. To-day, in spite of its flowers, it seemed to forbid and threaten. An intangible, but insistent, miasma seemed to haunt it. It shrank and skulked.

They stayed the little they must.

Then they went on.

The last climb was hardest of all.

The sharp ascent was pathless, its stones were pitiless; a terrible road for a barrow to travel. The narrow cut in the rock was night-dark. Shu A-fah was sorely tried, his muscles cracked with their straining. He ran sweat. Twice Pang Kee stumbled. The child whimpered.

But they had been here before; and they got through.

As they left the catacomb-like cleft the sun came out in full splendor.

It dazzled their sight.

Pang Soo covered her eyes with her hands. Shu A-fah glued his to the ground lest, blinded by the fierce sudden sunlight, he misstep and let the wheelbarrow jolt, even upset.

Pang Kee drew a deep breath of relief—a hard journey's end, goal reached at last—and sheltered her eyes with her hand at her forehead; and looked towards the cave.

There was neither cave nor where it had been.

They stood at the absolute edge of a sharp precipice.

The barrow was half suspended over the gash that looked to the terrified mother to yawn down to the core of the world an eternity of miles below. She dared not speak, she feared to breathe. If sun-blinded Shu A-fah pushed the wheel but a hair's breadth on, the barrow would crash down into the hideous chasm. That it must drag the boy down with it—for Shu A-fah would not let go his hold of the barrow in which Pang Soo sat nursing her lilies—did not cost Pang Kee, the mother, a thought. If Pang Soo but moved, the barrow might pitch down into a pitiless gulf, pitching Pang Soo into the cruel Yellow Springs. And Pang Kee the mother knew how impetuously Pang Soo often moved.

To snatch Pang Soo from the barrow was but an instant's work; Pang Kee dared not do it; her weight against the wheelbarrow, if by chance she but touched it, might dislodge the barrow, push it over the edge of the precipice, and pitch laughing Pang Soo to hideous death. Even now the rock they stood on might crumble and go!

"Kwan!" the peasant woman prayed without gesture or sound, her glazing eyes fastened on heedless Pang Soo.

Kwan Yin must have heard. She always hears, the Chinese peasants say. Pang Soo did not stir, fondled her lilies with quiet fingers. Shu A-fah, daring the light now, looked up, saw the agony on Pang Kee's face, gripped the barrow handles tighter, looked at happy Pang Soo, looked beyond her, over the end of the barrow—and saw!

Pang Kee saw him quiver before he stiffened. In an instant's short fragment he leaned back, straining strongly, quietly, cautiously, his feet taut on the rock, and jerked the wheelbarrow back.

Pang Kee gasped before she sobbed.

Shu A-fah's thin breast heaved. He was trembling cravenly. Cold sweat ran on his face. But his hands kept their grip, his feet stood firm, and he smiled at smiling Pang Soo.

The cave of Zut Qu was gone—as if it never had been. No trace of it remained. Not a trace was left of where it had been. The earthquake had wiped out the crag of impregnable rock. The indestructible had been destroyed. Everlasting stone was dust, if even dust, down numberless miles in the bottomless ditch.

Pang Kee's bank had failed.

It would pay her nothing again.

The peasant woman stood and looked long at where the treasure place had been. Her greedy ambition, her hope, her every plan, dashed, broken, damned. Swallowed in the earthquake's devouring maw. Pang Soo's marriage money! Pang Soo's marriage garments! The matchmaker's price! The glittering, gilded bride-chair! The bead-hung sparkling bride's-crown! Pang Soo's life was emptied. Pang Kee's life was broken—destroyed, thrust aside. Never now a rich man's first wife—scarcely a petty merchant's secondary place possible for Pang Soo! For herself—Pang Kee—all to do again, the little she could; endless toil, un-

warmed cold, unclad clattering bones and shivering flesh, thirst unquenched, salt too dear to buy. Never the price of funeral or grave! Rejoicing birds of prey her only death retinue! Never—live how long she might, toil how hard she should—never for her a bowl of rice!

Their eyes met: the boy's and the woman's.

"We go," she said with a sickened shrug, and turned and went away from the cave place of Zut Qu, her life's only friend, went as they had come, back to the nearly coinless, foodless hut so many weary *li* from here.

And Shu A-fah, scarcely daring to move, followed Pang Kee, walking backwards, stepping with terrible care, one foot desperately firm on the ground until his other foot had securely a hold; pulling the wheelbarrow slowly back inch by inch until nearing the tiny pool he found space to turn the barrow.

Pang Soo wondering, neither moved nor questioned. Perhaps Kwan, pitying the mother, ruled the child. Pang Soo sat quite still and nursed her little red lilies until she slept again.

CHAPTER XV

THERE were three stages of their journey back to the hut; not stages of time or of space or of incident, stages of mood—moods of Pang Kee. For this was her journey, this was her tragedy. Shu A-fah did not count in it or count to her; Pang Soo scarcely counted for more. Defeat fenced Pang Kee off from them, enwalled her—alone.

She spoke no complaint, told no regret; just went stolidly back. But the lad and the child felt her remoteness, sensed her apart, stern, unapproachable. Shu A-fah scarcely looked at her; sharing her new burden so the little he could; keeping silence with her in her hour of bitter withdrawal. Evan Pang Soo did not question the woman

once. They spoke to each other but little; spoke low when they spoke. Shu A-fah respected the disappointment he partly understood. Pang Soo a little respected the silence she did not understand, and resented it more. The day had begun with a crisp sense of adventure in an atmosphere of determined achievement; it had snapped, and fallen into drab gloom. Pang Soo felt cheated. She moved a little farther from her mother, moved near Shu A-fah.

And Shu A-fah, as always, did his best by Pang Soo. He found her a pebble, prettily shaped, silken to touch, gaily colored. He found her a blue-tipped feather a bird had lost. Twice he ran aside, parted a bush and brought her a flower. One blossom was fragrant, and pleased Pang Soo much. He stripped a shrub of its few late berries, and held them in his cupped hands—a dish for Pang Soo—until she had eaten them all. He carried her when she would. He watched and guarded her steps the little she chose to walk—one hand free to serve her, his other hand firm on the barrow he pushed.

Restless, discomforted by the mother's numb gloom, Pang Soo walked and was carried, fretful and fitful, but for the most she chose to sit in the wheelbarrow alternately sleepy and sulky, watching her mother now and then with troubled question in her little eyes. She would have comforted Pang Kee if she had known how.

Pang Kee's numb, dumb mood stayed. But Pang Soo's discomfort gradually lessened; for the day grew brighter, there were things to see, pretty things to covet, and Shu A-fah served and soothed her patiently, smiling back at her when she smiled, smiling back at her cautiously when she frowned.

Pang Kee paid no attention to them. She was numb, dulled, not consciously unhappy. Defeated, she accepted defeat as a matter of course; accepted it with the stolid, unresisting acceptance which is the flaw of the Chinese

peasant—*and the hallmark.* She had suffered when the blow hit her. She was not suffering now. At least she did not know her pain. She just trudged on.

There was balm in the day. It was clearer now, the sun slowly sinking was unveiled, a wine-like tang was in the autumn air; the peasant boy and little sore-footed Pang Soo drank it. There was beauty free by the wayside: the pebbles that shone, a blossom now and then, a gray bird a-wing up in the blue sky, painted leaves on the trees, a lily laid on a pathside broken shrine; Pang Soo and Shu A-fah saw it all, and were glad. They partook.

Such is the universal, essential Rice of China: beauty great and small—beauty of Nature, beauty of thought, tradition, the music the centuries have woven in beautiful tapestry of beliefs and code, national dignities; a people's inexhaustible solace: the spiritual rice of China—the one great food of all Chinese, that has kept them fine, kept them tranquil through vicissitude and want, armored them against defeat of heart, starvation of mind, deterioration of ethics or of manner. The Chinese peasant, the Chinese criminal, is a gentleman because he loves flowers, the song of the wind, the sunlight's sparkle and the moonlight's ripple on the water, loves every beauty he sees and *sees* every loveliness he meets; is a gentleman for this, and, too, because something of China's immense, immeasurable store of art, literature, code of manners, filial scripture has soaked through—as birthright does and must—a perfume and a strength to every Chinese. Famine cannot ultimately starve a people of which that is true. Can "civilizations" less fine, less sound than their own exterminate them, absorb them? Time will know.

The Chinese hold the greatest heritage on earth, the greatest heritage in human history. May their gods preserve it! The Angel of Justice guard it!

Not one per cent. of China's uncounted millions can read. But China's mighty literature—earth's greatest—has in some part filtered through to every Chinese. They can

neither read nor write, but by right and might of racial inheritance the poorest Chinese peasant, the most ruthless Chinese criminal, is in some touch with China's literature, knows and echoes the poetry of its masters, the wisdom of its sages. Books are not the only treasures of literature. Homer "wrote" for thousands and generations who could not read from the written page, but who read.

Every Chinese is in touch with Nature; hears her message, reads and keeps her music.

In every generation millions of Chinese never taste the rice that grows in the paddy patches. All Chinese have the greater Rice; and feast.

Presently Pang Soo demanded food.

Nothing loath, Shu A-fah stopped the barrow, fixed it firm, and took the remnant of their cakes and persimmons from a basket, kept a little for himself, divided larger, better shares between the child and her mother.

Pang Soo fell to eagerly.

Pang Kee squatted down when Shu A-fah halted. Her legs knew that they were tired if the woman did not.

"Eat, honorable very-old-one," the boy entreated.

Pang Kee looked at the food dully and pushed it away.

Suddenly she broke into noisy grief. The storm-time had come; the second stage of her home returning; grief loud, angry, articulate; Chinese woman reasserting itself, wailing, finding sour relief through the noise and anger of an explosive safety-valve.

Shu A-fah munched his grain cake quietly. He was not too greatly disturbed. Shu A-fah was traveled. He had seen and had heard repeatedly the fury of Chinese womanhood balked and annoyed expressing itself in street and in market-place.

Not so Pang Soo; she was startled and frightened. She continued to eat, but her face puckered and her eyes swam with slow tears of dislike and resentment.

Pang Kee continued to rave; her curses were many, her tears were few. She railed at fate, she reproached the

gods, almost she cursed them, she threatened them. Vituperative, hysterical, eloquent for the first time in her life. Expression is not in the Chinese peasant's gamut. His emotion must be intense before he can express it, or wishes to express it; racial dignity permeates, dominates every Chinese stratum, and makes them reticent even more than lack of words does. The vocabulary of the unschooled Chinese peasant is not scanty, and it is pictured and beautiful, for he is Nature taught, and a thousand traditions are known to him, and never far from his thought. When a Chinese woman decides to speak she has plenty to say. Pang Kee said a great deal; much of it was not nice, all of it was fierce.

But violent rages have as sudden, if not as violent, ends as violent delights have. Pang Kee's rage wore itself out, died with a weary groan.

Shu A-fah went close to her. Pang Soo cuddled down in the barrow with a sigh of relief.

"Eat, beloved mother-one," the boy begged again. Pang Kee took the cake he offered, and she began to eat slowly and quietly. And when their last morsel had been eaten she got up and went on towards the hut.

It was Pang Kee and not Pang Soo whom Shu A-fah watched and tended now as they journeyed on. He called her attention to a clump of pink-feathered coarse grass. And when again he found a handful of berries, still juicy and edible, it was to Pang Kee that he gave them. It was to Pang Kee that he sometimes spoke.

They still had a long *li* to go; a *li* of human neglect to Pang Soo. Shu A-fah still pushed the wheelbarrow, but it jolted and bumped. Pang Soo looked at him with surprise; Shu A-fah never had let the barrow do that to her before. Once she upbraided him impatiently. For once Shu A-fah did not hear Pang Soo, or if he heard he did not heed. He was obsessed with troubled Pang Kee.

Pang Soo frowned and went to sleep; philosophical with the wiseness of inherited centuries of uncomplaining toil,

stolid acceptance of hardships and discomforts. Pang Kee and Shu A-fah had done their united utmost to spoil her, but at moments of dilemma and crisis always Pang Soo the peasant baby reverted to "the patient shrug" of her race and caste.

They reached the hut as the sunset flung fire of many colors behind it. They waited to look; never too tired, never too hungry or too busy to wait and watch what was beautiful.

The sun went. There was no twilight. There is none in all Asia. It is day, then instantly it is night.

Shu A-fah opened the hut door.

Pang Kee lifted Pang Soo and carried her into the house.

Shu A-fah knelt by the *k'ang*, and rekindled it. He was deft at the task. Soon the small room was rosy with the glow of the fire.

Pang Kee filled the kettle.

Stubborn determination and hope flamed in her face. The Chinese woman was herself again. Motherhood reasserted itself and was confident.

The kettle simmered faintly.

Pang Kee bade Shu A-fah fetch the tea bowls.

"We will drink the honorable tea, that rich lord-ones drink every day," she told them proudly, flinging her defiance at defeat so. "We will feast for an hour. Then we will sleep well until the hour-of-the-dragon calls us. We have been far, and have brought nothing back except older shoes than we wore when we started, and the debt of a day in which no work has been done." She snapped her fingers. "Let it not vex us. What was—up there where the earthquake had been before us—was to be. It is done. No more of it. It has robbed me, but it shall not thwart me. I will repay. It shall not rob you, Pang Soo, red-lily-one. Your robe shall be silk. Your bride-chair shall be rich. We will toil more," she told Shu A-fah.

Shu A-fah's eyes were troubled. It was not the thought of more and harder work that troubled him.

Nothing troubled Pang Soo. She clapped her tiny velvet hands, gurgling approval.

"And I will get you rice, mother-one!" she cried.

"Hush thee," the woman bade; but she said it tenderly. "That foolish dream was but a joke-thing, and it is gone. No more of it. I shall eat as I always have; to do that suits old bellies best. But you shall eat rice, my fragrant one, very fine rice piled high in dishes of rare chiseled silver. You go—to happiness and wealth. I stay. I shall like best to stay—to be as I have been. New things for you, when the glad day of gold is ripe. Old things that I know and like for me." Pang Kee laughed happily.

This was the third stage of her home-coming, her journey back from the cave of Zut Qu: Chinese woman, Chinese mother, braced, staunch, determined, firm of hope; invincible motherhood, victor over defeat.

They drank and ate; a cheery meal; drank their unaccustomed luxury of tea, drank it scalding, ate morsels of fat raw fish and delicious lumps of ginger.

Then they slept.

Pang Soo slept sweetly and well.

Shu A-fah out by the barrow did not sleep soon, and his sleep was fitful, troubled and sour.

Pang Kee slept heavily, but ill, tortured by a dream.

She did not dream of earthquake. She dreamed of rice. She gnawed her lip in her sleep.

CHAPTER XVI

PANG KEE kept her word; she toiled longer and harder than she had, and she drove the boy Shu A-fah to longer hours and heavier tasks.

Shu A-fah did not flinch.

Again the hoard of coins grew in their hiding-place.

Pang Kee denied herself all she could and live to work. The scanty food and rest she had allowed herself until now

had been gluttony and idleness compared to what she allowed herself now. She drank more—water. She rested less, thought and planned more, bargained shrewder, closer. A liter of millet had to last longer.

The peasant woman drove herself to her tether's length. But always she was sunny with Pang Soo. And, for the most, she was oddly tender to Shu A-fah, for all that she drove and scanted him. She seemed to lean on him, and to lean on him more and more.

Neither Pang Soo nor Shu A-fah heard her speak of rice again.

But she dreamed of it sometimes.

And often when they were together, and not with her, they talked and planned; talked of rice, of Pang Kee's desire to have it, and planned how they could get it for her —in youth's golden future: some day! What the woman had told them of the beautiful white rice that only the rich and the noble ate had fired their young fancies. Both the boy and the girl determined to get a cupful of rice for Pang Kee if ever they could. Pang Soo had no doubt that she should. Shu A-fah doubted, but hoped.

It was not for themselves that they wished it. They wanted it for her. Except for one paramount wish, which even in his secret mind he had not worded yet, Shu A-fah was little selfish; and he liked well enough the common food of his peasant lot. He liked it best when it was enough; when it was, it satisfied him, mind as well as body. And Pang Soo, self-indulgent by sex, instinct and training, had no thought to eat rice herself. If she had had it, she would not have kept even a grain for herself—not even if she had been hungry; she wanted it all for Pang Kee.

There was scarcely a chance that Pang Kee ever would taste rice. But her craving, always a prick, often a torture, had, too, been a beneficence, as so many ills are, for it had seeded unselfishness and self-sacrifice in Pang Soo, promised Pang Soo's future a perfume it otherwise might have

lacked, gave her purpose, an unconscious readiness for self-denial, endurance, grit.

A year passed; a year so packed with work and persistent contriving and saving that the thought of rice came less and less to Pang Kee. She slept too sound and too instantly when she lay on the *k'ang,* she was too engrossed in toil while awake, to dream or to be vulnerable to the fitful craving that, so, stalked her less and less.

It was not a profitable year. But they held their own. The woman's grim determination served them well. Shu A-fah grew in muscle and sinew. His patience was splendid, his industry was indefatigable.

It was hard times with them all the way that long, slow year. Their tiny crops were late and scant. Millet was scarce and dear. Famine threatened. Firing was hard to find. But they carried on, shoulder to shoulder, the woman and the boy. And though the coins she stored there were few and pitifully small, Pang Kee put one in her hiding-place oftener than she took one out. She had not sold much of what she had brought from the wizard-woman's cave.

As the hard moons came and went the woman and the boy, befriended and befriending, linked in toil, grew in mutual affection, more and more knit close in affection.

Pang Soo grew prettier and prettier.

The cold Pepper-moon was close upon them when Pang Kee spoke—told Shu A-fah of what she had brooded long.

Pang Soo slept.

Pang Kee and he squatted by the *k'ang,* working still; weaving a basket, mending a coat and padding it with thick and precious paper against December's cruel cold.

They crouched low to their work, to catch on it such light as the *k'ang's* fire threw them. But their better light came from the full moon blazing down from a gray frozen sky.

"You and I shall stay together?" the woman said without glancing up from the paper she was folding.

"Always together, mother-one!" Shu A-fah answered quickly, eager promise ringing in his young voice.

"You shall be my son."

The boy's hand trembled at its work. His eyes flashed happily.

"I will adopt you."

The basket clattered from Shu A-fah's hand.

"I would not be alone when the lily-one is gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"To a bridegroom's courtyard," the mother asserted proudly.

"Who will wed her? She has no marriage-money, not the price of a bride-dress. Will give her to a beggar?"

Pang Kee sighed heavily. "I, her mother, must find a way. Kwan will help me. Pang Soo's feet are very small."

"She is very young."

"She is young," Pang Kee owned. "But the time will come."

Shu A-fah's eyes were desperate in the fire.

"I would not lie in an unworshiped grave. Pang Lee has lain so too long. He shall adopt you; I will adopt you in his name. You shall be our son. You shall wail my funeral, and worship at our grave when I lie again with Pang Lee. When Pang Soo is gone, not to come again to poverty in a peasant hut, we will toil together, you and I, toil and save, and presently I will buy you a wife, a strong peasant woman older than you, who can do much work, a big-footed woman stout of back, older, staid, but not too old to bear a child. My son must beget sons that always our graves shall have our rites."

"You cannot adopt me. I know not my birth. If I did, I may not be of the right generation."

Pang Kee frowned anxiously.

"It will make difficulty," she confessed. "But we will bribe the priests. They will arrange it. The way will be found. I have determined. Pang Lee shall adopt you. You shall be our son, our son Pang A-fah."

"I will not consent." Shu A-fah looked squarely in the woman's face. He spoke sternly. His jaw set hard.

"Why?" the woman snapped.

But she still spoke softly—because Pang Soo slept.

And, because Pang Soo slept, Shu A-fah answered softly. But his voice was firm, his eyes were hard.

"It revolts me," the boy told her.

"I will it, worm," the woman hissed. "It is not for you to refuse, outcast, homeless no-name! I took you in, gave you to share our shelter and our food. You shall serve me as I command. Ingrate!"

Shu A-fah hung his head, took up the fallen basket, braided steadily. But his jaw did not relax, his fingers would not shake again.

"True-words, O honorable very-old," he said quietly; "this degraded one owes you much. His gratitude is great." Shu A-fah spoke sincerely. He did not weigh the service and loyalty he had given against what Pang Kee had given him.

"I will serve you with my life—in all else. I will not be your son by adoption. All you ask but that. Never that."

"Why?" the woman hissed again, almost too angry to hiss the one word.

"It revolts me," the boy repeated.

Pang Kee, overmastered by her rage—the Chinese woman's sudden, devastating rage—had to wait a moment, not until her fury had cooled, it would not cool to-night, it must overboil and blister first; she had to wait until she could control her quivering mouth to articulate.

The boy braided on steadily. He did not look up again.

When she could speak, if such gibbering can be called speech, Pang Kee broke out at him wildly, filthily, berating, cursing, drenching him with vitriolic hate.

Shu A-fah made no answer.

He would not tell her why the idea of being adopted by her, by her husband Pang Lee, revolted him, because he

did not know. He sickened at the thought, shaken by an emotion that a boy's virgin heart did not recognize.

Pang Kee's crackling voice grew shriller. Pang Soo stirred uneasily in her quilt on the *k'ang*.

Shu A-fah looked up then, looked up suddenly, and pointed to the sleeping girl.

"Gentler, mother-one," he begged whispering. "We trouble the lily-one."

Instantly Pang Kee controlled herself. But her fury to him held. She leaned toward him until her distorted face almost touched his.

And her woman's instinct leapt at his secret which Shu A-fah himself did not know or understand.

"Bastard! Worm son of polluted she-worms," Pang Kee, whom he had served so well, hissed at him softly but clearly. "You look for my flower, dirty foul one! You would have her, the fit mate of a great noble, to lie on your beggar's mat! Even it a debt to me!"

Shu A-fah gazed at her with a blanching, pitiful face—the terrible graying of yellow skin that tells Chinese torture. She yapped on, snarling and vicious, tore his heart and its unsuspected secret from his very breast, flung it on the ground between them; cruel and relentless as the Empress Wu was in rage—the great but ruthless Chinese woman who, when her peonies failed to bloom at her command, had every peony in China uprooted, destroyed, commanded that never again should peonies grow in China.

Pang Kee riddled the heart of the boy, spat at his quivering self-respect, degraded, scorched him. Her anger gave her words she scarcely had known, a terrible, hideous vocabulary.

And the boy's secret—sacred young love, pure, clean love—lay raw and lacerated on the hovel floor, down on the squalid dust.

Pang Soo smiled happily in her sleep.

"Go!"

Shu A-fah got up slowly. He put the unfinished basket carefully down on the room's one shelf, looked a moment at Pang Soo as she slept, a human lily at ease on a Chinese quilt.

Shu A-fah never had lain on a quilt.

He looked at Pang Soo, then turned and lurched to the door.

Pang Kee, infuriated, watched him with blazing, murderous eyes.

"The garments you wear are mine!" the demented woman taunted him untruthfully. The boy had earned and bought them, the poor little they were. "I give them to you, bastard. They are soiled. I throw them at you. Go naked you should, go to die unclothed in the cold and storm. I clothe you. Go—go starve and perish, carrion. I curse you."

Shu A-fah turned at the door, paused a sorrowful instant.

"Kwan be with you," he said softly.

He unbolted the door, and closed it behind him.

He sobbed standing outside the door.

He drew a silver coin out from his coarse, ragged vest; a coin he had earned in the town and had kept for a joy-surprise to Pang Kee, kept to lay on her lap a festival-gift when to-morrow dawned on the Snake-god's glad festival of frolic and dumplings.

He fingered the silver piece with sad lingering hands, then laid it softly in the barrow. Pang Kee would find it at dawn.

A long moment he stood and looked at the hovel he loved, the only home he ever had known. He was weeping now.

"Kwan be with it!" he prayed; then Shu A-fah went away, weeping still, went towards the city that slept within its barred and bolted gates, went blessing Pang Kee as he wept.

CHAPTER XVII

AT cold dawn Pang Kee opened the hovel door and peered about for Shu A-fah.

Pang Soo still slept. The growing girl had the soldier's aptitude for sleep, little matter when or where. Few Chinese have it; rich and poor they wake at dawn. And there's scarcely a sloth in China. All night long Pang Soo had slept dreamless and snug.

Worn out by the storm of her own rage Pang Kee slept soon. Not long after midnight she had waked racked and tortured by the old senseless longing. She could neither shake it off nor soothe it. It tossed and writhed her. For a long Chinese hour she fought it, counted the leaves on a large mulberry tree, recited doggerel backwards, fixed her thought as well as she could on the morrow's festival and all the sights that Pang Soo should see at it. When everything else failed, usually Pang Kee could fix her thought, fasten her interest, on Pang Soo. It had been little use last night; she forced her thought to her daughter, she could fix her stomach on nothing but rice. For the time, rice ousted Pang Soo.

The Chinese believe that the mind is in the stomach, that we think with our stomachs. And it can be argued. If the stomach is the seat of all Chinese minds, it seems to be the seat of some Western minds.

Desperate, she climbed from the *k'ang*, and took a lump from the jar in which already the ginger was low, climbed back into the quilts, and sucked hard at the knob of pungent root. It eased her a little, but that did not last long. Pang Kee was violently sick.

When she lay beside Pang Soo again, trembling and weak, Pang Kee felt that she'd have given their last silver coin for a cup of rice. Perhaps in her craving she would, perhaps not. That can never be solved; you cannot buy

rice long *li* from anywhere in the deep of night in snow-bound Shantung.

Pang Kee, the rice-fiend who never had tasted rice, scarcely had seen it, and then the meanest, lay still and endured; bearing her discomfort because she had to—as most discomforts are borne everywhere—bearing it silent and motionless, because Pang Soo slept.

At dawn—not always welcome since dawn meant toil, weariness added to until dark, and probably cold and hunger as well, flesh that shivered, bones that creaked and ached—Pang Kee welcomed the first gray shred that seeped through the curtained window.

She had made the curtain of rags, and Shu A-fah had put it up, to make the securer Pang Soo's undisturbed sleeping.

She crept from the quilt, slid from the *k'ang*, opened the door as quietly as she could—uncouth Pang Kee could be skilfully quiet when Pang Soo slept.

It was terribly cold beyond the door. The sunless air whipped and stung, but it braced her.

She looked about for Shu A-fah.

She knew that she ill could spare him; she had no estimate of how ill.

He must stay with them, of course; warm himself at the *k'ang*, then work to his utmost—his own work and hers. She would deck the lily-one, and take her to the City festival, if her own trembling legs could go so far. They should! Or, perhaps they'd ride in the barrow, she and Pang Soo. When Shu A-fah had pushed them to the City gate, he could find well-paid errands to do until the end of the festival. There were abundant errands to do on festival days, sometimes a coin dropped from a careless hand, a pin from a woman's hair, a pouch foolishly flaunted at a dandy's girdle as the dandy lurched from a wine-shop.

Pang Soo should not miss the festival. Shu A-fah should not miss the errand coins or the richer harvest at the wine-shop doors.

But first she would deal with him here. He should not again be in the hut until their bargain was struck and sworn. He should consent to the adoption and thank her for it. Pang Soo's brother could not wed Pang Soo. The adoption should be quick—no matter what it cost. The priests would trust her, if she lacked much of the price. They knew that what she owed she would pay. At shop or stall she must pay before she took, because the poor merchants she bought from could not afford to wait. But her credit stood good, and the priests could afford to wait. And they should be paid. It would be ill-luck as well as dishonest to neglect such a debt. Shu A-fah could work it off little by little; Shu A-fah and Shu A-fah's sturdy, maturer wife. She'd find him a wife before long.

The woman's anger had not cooled. She had it her servant now, under control; that was all. It should cost him much, and cost him long. He should pay, he and his wife and their sons!

Shu A-fah should have a son's place in her hut, toil for her, support her as long as she lived, a son's place at her grave, but never again a son's place in her heart.

And the fool might have had that!

She could not see him.

Cursing him tartly, she searched for him.

She did not find him.

So, he *had* gone!

He would come back.

It did not occur to Pang Kee that Shu A-fah might not come back.

She knew him so well.

He would come back, and bring with him money or stuff much worth having. He always did.

Winter gnawed at Shantung.

Spring came in a soft mist of young willow leaves, a bluer sky—the turquoise sky of North China. Tiny violets made a mauve sheen down in the new grass.

Summer came. The poppy bloomed.

But Shu A-fah did not come back. No sign came from him, no word of him.

Pang Soo wondered a little at first, wondered indifferently, laughed idly, and forgot.

Pang Kee was surprised at that, and glad.

Pang Kee hated Shu A-fah addedly that he did not return, had callously and ungratefully left her in the lurch.

She missed him—bitterly, venomously at first. Presently she missed him sadly, more kindly. When the wild white roses and the clove of the wild pinks made summer a perfume Pang Kee knew that she longed for Shu A-fah; longed for him not in avarice but in mother-longing. She prayed Kwan that when Pang Soo was wed Shu A-fah might come back, not leave her again.

When ice-time came again, all their world locked in cold, torn and tattered by storm, a message came from Shu A-fah, the first message from Shu A-fah to Pang Kee.

"After long moons he would come to the honorable home of ancient Pang Kee. He would bring treasure, the price of much rice. Until he could bring it, he would not come. But always while he lived the rent of the melon-patch should be paid."

More than that Pang Kee could not wring from the messenger—a tatterdemalion she never had seen before, and never was to see again.

But he brought a gift as well as a message: a little red flower in a very blue pot, and a coin packed in many small rags. The coin was small but it was gold. Pang Kee gasped. And she was amazed that the beggar-man had not betrayed such a tempting trust. Had Shu A-fah become, in some miracle way, the King of a Beggar Clan? Or, at least, a Prince? A King of Beggars always was rich. Would such Majesty visit her some day? Shu A-fah always had kept his word.

She carried the flower in its pot to the temple, and gave it to Kwan Yin,

She hoarded the piece of gold. Her coins were low, and the go-between was asking an extortionate price.

For Pang Kee was offering the girl in marriage now, pressing for it as best she could, since no marriage-offer had sought Pang Soo.

Wherever men of means were apt to gather, whenever mothers seeking daughters-in-law were rumored, Pang Kee, when she could contrive it, took Pang Soo, richly painted, beautifully dressed, on seeming errand or to watch some sight of market or temple courtyard.

Many had looked, none had offered.

Pang Kee expected less now than she had. A marriage must be found, of course; but Pang Kee began to sense that she must bargain more modestly than she had intended. It ground her. But she did not falter.

Two years came and went.

Twice again a gift and a message came from Shu A-fah.

Pang Kee did not tell Pang Soo.

But by chance Pang Soo overheard.

The first time she shrugged.

The other time Pang Soo yawned.

Life was boring Pang Soo just then. She was ripe for adventure, keyed for gaiety and luxury. Neither came.

They were years of ups and downs. Sometimes the secret hoard grew, sometimes it dwindled, more than once the ginger-jar was empty, the meal and the salt low, the food-shelf almost bare.

Pang Kee rarely thought of rice; when she did, it scarcely troubled her. Body and heart she was obsessed with toil: toil to earn for Pang Soo.

More and more the girl shared her mother's labor, and tried to share it fairly. In part her strong young body longed for activity, even the activity of physical work; in part she longed to ease Pang Kee's toil by sharing it. A little she did share, but Pang Kee—indulgent in all else—would not let Pang Soo disfigure herself in any way, and the peasant woman knew what havoc such tasks as hers

wrought with young comeliness. Pang Soo's binded feet prevented much that she would have done, Pang Kee prevented more. Nothing must roughen Pang Soo's skin or break her delicate finger-nails. The flowerlike, apricot, satin body must fetch its price, must get Pang Soo honorable happiness and lifelong ease.

Once, when their plight was sore, so bad that Pang Kee could not disguise it from Pang Soo, the girl, sitting weaving reeds in the poor garden-patch that bent-backed Pang Kee was weeding, carefully stacking every weed for fuel and for food, put down the reeds, and said:

"Mother-one, unbind my feet!"

Pang Kee gasped.

"They hurt you, Pang Soo?"

"They do not hurt."

"I will buy you an opium smoke."

Pang Soo smiled gently. She wondered how Pang Kee would find the price of a poppy pill. She knew that possibly slugs alone must thicken their milletless broth tomorrow. And slugs were not easy to find just now.

"I need no pipe, mother-one. It is not that that I would have."

"What would you, Pang Soo?"

"Partnership," the girl said earnestly.

Pang Kee did not understand. The word meant little to her. Pang Soo's using of it meant nothing. Often the girl used words that were new to the mother. Pang Soo had had teachers who knew many words.

"What mean you, child-one?"

"Nay, I am not a child now, mother-one. Unbind my feet that I may go swiftly and sure; that I may work with you, doing half of our toil now, doing all of it presently when old years crown you, my already venerable mother-one. I have played and idled long enough, too long. Now I would work. Unbind my feet, I pray you."

Pang Kee screamed hoarsely. She left her weeding, came and crouched down by Pang Soo, sobbing.

"Say it not again!" she cried. "Say it never! Think it never! I would coffin you sooner."

The girl smiled indulgently. Such a coffin as would satisfy the mother-one for her would, she knew, cost many coins. Where were they to come from!

"I would not to leave you, mother-one. I would serve you. Will you not un—"

"Say it not! I forbid you! Your beautiful golden-lilies! They cost me long moons of terrible toil! I lacked meal to pay for them the quicker. My back trembled and sickened and broke for them. My legs ached for them. For them I pushed Hin Ung the cabinet-maker and two of his wives in the barrow when Shu A-fah was afar, pushed them, in the hot of Cassia-moon, from Dead Tiger Village to Three-roof Bridge. Hin Ung is fat and heavy. His number-one weighs more. I hired the best binder. They are my joy, your beautiful golden-lilies that I gave you. They cost me much."

"Let my unbinded feet repay you!"

"Would have me curse you? Word it not again, lest I strike you." Pang Kee began to weep feebly—tears of disappointment and of sick fatigue, tears of hurt pride, largess scorned, and of empty stomach.

Pang Soo had had her breakfast.

Pang Kee lying, as Pang Soo had suspected, had said that she had eaten hers while Pang Soo still slept.

Pang Soo said no more.

Pang Kee began to weed again.

"Men," she said over her bent shoulder, "who have coins in their *chias,* plenty in their courtyards, do not take big-feet wives. None, I would choose for you, would drink the red-marriage-cup with a bride who had not proper lilies. Your lilies are best class."

"I would stay with you, my mother," Pang Soo said softly, busy again at the weaving of the reeds.

Pang Kee chuckled significantly.

"You will say it. You will weep and wail it. But you

will not *feel* it when your gold-and-crimson bride-chair comes. A bride's lot is fragrant, girl-one. Your bride time ripens."

Pang Soo doubted it. She made no comment; went on weaving carefully.

"Pang Soo!"

"Mother-one?"

"Have you seen a man that moved you to kindness?"

Pang Soo flushed softly. "One," she said.

"Who one? Where place?"

"I Wing, the apothecary. At the fair in the City Gate Street."

"Yea. I saw him look at you there. I did not let him see me see. But I was watching."

Pang Soo smiled. She knew that her mother's eyes always were keen on her and on all that approached or concerned her.

"The only time, lily-one?"

"Again yesterday when I took your message to Lo Tan. We passed in the City Street. He looked at me. His eyes lingered on me. They were kind."

Pang Kee was troubled. At the City Gate Street fair Pang Soo had worn her best clothes, all her cheap but showy jewelry, her face had been exquisitely rouged, but yesterday on her sudden errand the girl's face had been unpainted, her trousers coarse and patched. But her tiny feet had worn splendid crimson gold-encrusted shoes! Pang Kee's face cleared a little. If . . . ! I Wing the apothecary was not a great one, neither mandarin nor lesser official. But he was rich, not long come to his dead father's shop. His mother doted on him, and was easy-going, it was said. And it was well known that she sought a wife again for I Wing. His young wife had died on her child-mat; and the child had died with the mother. I Wing was young, not too many years a man. He was generous; he had a prosperous business, owned well-rented houses, a share in the pawn-shop, a rich-man's *chia*. He

had undoubted wealth; his mother was reputed to be even richer.

And I Wing the apothecary was straight-shaped, fair of face, long-nailed. His courtyard was not too far, not farther than she could walk—in summer time. Perhaps I Wing would let her visit I Soo sometimes—in summer-time. If . . .

She would go to the *mei-jên* to-morrow.

If! If only!

CHAPTER XVIII

PANG KEE failed.

The matchmaker laughed at her.

Finally the woman agreed to inspect Pang Soo—for a price.

It took Pang Kee a moon to find the price. But Pang Kee found it. The *mei-jên* came and appraised the girl; measured her feet, tested her strength, looked at her teeth and skin, noted her speech, watched her posturing—such slow, circumscribed posturing as a small-footed can—heard Pang Soo sing and pick the tiny lap-harp that Pang Kee had paid to have her taught.

Inspection done, Pang Soo was sent to gather a melon, drive off the menacing birds, bring water from the brook, and bargaining began.

The matchmaker frowned. "Your daughter will bring but small price, if a price. She will be most difficult to place—if I, the most successful *mei-jên* in Shantung, can place her at all."

Pang Kee bridled. But she was not unduly alarmed. The case was taking its course. Marriage bargaining usually is prolonged and shrewd. Invariably the matchmaker deprecates, pretends to hesitate.

"A rich man has looked on her with desire," the mother boasted.

The matchmaker was careful to show no sign of the

quickened interest she suddenly felt. A man already in love would smooth many difficulties, make her task delightfully easy; providing, of course, that he was his own marriage-master, could select his own wife untrammeled by ancestral authority.

"Ah," See Chee said indifferently.

"I Wing the apothecary has looked on her. His eyes linger on her. He desires her."

"Does I Yeh, the mother of I Wing, desire her?" the *mei-jên* asked significantly.

Inwardly Pang Kee winced. But, "I Yeh is indulgent to I Wing," she said stoutly.

"In many things," the other agreed. "The more a woman dotes on her son, the less she inclines to let him follow his love-whims, especially in the permanent way. She will give him a wife, since to remain wifeless discredits a man, and that she may have grandsons and the grandsons of grandsons to credit her funeral and serve her grave perpetually. But she does not wish for him a wife to supplant her herself in his love. If I Wing has looked at Pang Soo as you think, it will not help the match on with his mother."

To that Pang Kee made no reply; there was none, she feared.

"If I were willing to incense I Yeh by proposing such a marriage, my fee would be paid before I went to her."

Pang Kee had expected that. "Name it," she said.

See Chee did.

Pang Kee laughed derisively.

"That would be preliminary payment to me before I risk my great reputation by making to I Yeh a proposal she will deem preposterous. If by Kwan's miracle kindness and my own immense skill, I Yeh were induced to consent, a sum twice as much you would pay me before the betrothal gifts were exchanged."

"You ask too much."

"I ask too little; a fraction of my always charge, be-

cause you are poor and stand high in my sympathy and regard, honorable Pang Kee."

"Many times too much."

"Then the astrologer would ask his fee before he cast the horoscopes. If they were not auspicious, the betrothal could not be concluded."

Of course Pang Kee knew that. She thought quickly.

"I will have the horoscopes cast before you go to I Yeh," she said.

"Can you?" The *mei-jên* was skeptical.

"I will do it."

"When you have accomplished it, then, if the horoscopes are entirely favorable, I will consider the matter again."

"It would strengthen your request, if you were enabled to show I Yeh that the horoscopes were most favorable."

See Chee admitted it. In a stronghold of superstition, where women are more sincerely superstitious than the men are, I Yeh, the apothecary's mother, was, See Chee knew, of all the most deep-sunk in superstition's tight-holding quagmire.

See Chee admitted it, and went on with her criticism of Pang Soo.

"She is too old."

Pang Kee laughed. "Women of thirty years, forty even, are unmarried and are eagerly sought!"

"True words. *Women,* not toy-ones. Women who can work in the fields, crush rocks, drag logs, burn charcoal; do the work of a man on half a man's rice, and do a woman's work as well while her husband rests and smokes. Peasant parents seek such wives for their young sons. This girl of yours cannot do a woman's work, and could do no part of a man-one's. She is neither lusty peasant nor true fine lady. You have bred her wrong. Her feet are tiny, beautifully squeezed. I congratulate her feet, I praise the binder who bound them. They are feet for a doting rich man's courtyards. They can do little work, never carry her far, never carry her fast. But a rich man will not have

her, or a rich man's parents select her for him. Her voice is too heavy; the thick voice of the South more than the music-mouthed of Shantung. Her eyebrows need plucking. Plucking may mark and disfigure. It should have been performed long ago and repeatedly. Her ears are too small. Her hands are small, but she does not use them elegantly. She knows no etiquette. She is uneducated. She is wilful, she carries her head like an untamed colt whose mother has nursed him too long."

Pang Kee broke into fierce denial and guarded vituperation. She recited Pang Soo's virtues and allurements, gave a list of Pang Soo's teachers and the great price she, Pang Kee, had paid them.

The *mei-jên* was unmoved. "I shall waste my time and injure my reputation if I attempt to place her," she said with a shrug of dismissal that discouraged Pang Kee far more than the matchmaker's words had. "Her education is little. You have overpaid ill-informed ones to ill-teach her. Her manners are nothing. She has no manners. She would not serve her mother-in-law amiably. Men require meek wives—unless they are fools. I have no fool on my bridegroom list just now. It would cost me fatigue, journeys, much expense to seek one. I probably should not find one. And fool men have not always fool parents. You have bid me to a thing of more difficulty than ever before has been offered me. I regret to refuse the business. Honesty compels me to refuse it. I go." She rose.

But that was not the end, not nearly the end.

For a long hour they quarreled and haggled.

Pang Kee desired, and as yet required, a rich, handsome, indulgent bridegroom. See Chee doubted being able to secure any bridegroom at all.

But at last the bargain was made, and the go-between went, moving dejectedly until she was out of sight; walking briskly, chuckling, well satisfied when she no longer could be seen by Pang Kee.

In part she had spoken truthfully to Pang Kee. The

girl *was* ill-trained to be a peasant's wife. Her hands would coarsen and strengthen with toil. Her temper See Chee suspected and doubted. But her feet were a tempting asset. Not a man, no matter how mean and poor, but would be proud to own and boast such exquisite feet, and willing to do rather more than his share of back-breaking work for them and in their place. The girl's soft starry eyes would fetch a price. Her voice was lovely, a restful voice a man could not tire of soon. See Chee had no doubt that she could arrange a marriage. That it could be such a marriage as crazy Pang Kee sought was impossible. I Wing the apothecary was out of the question.

But before she went away she had promised Pang Kee that she would approach I Wing's mother. Perhaps she would; cautiously, expecting to fail in the business. But only by doing it could she exact the fullest price from Pang Kee. Pang Kee would demand proof. And in approaching with the greatest respect and diffidence the apothecary's mother she might open a way to finding a suitable wife for I Wing. Her fee for arranging such a marriage would be commensurately large. Yes, she would sound the apothecary's mother—in more ways than one. And she also would find the pretty minx of Pang Kee, the hut woman, a suitable husband. Pang Kee should pay her. And the man, or his family, too should pay; pay her for finding a girl with such beautiful feet.

The fever of impatience tore and beriled Pang Kee.

She snarled at the poor old house-cat, she cursed the ground she dug. But she was yearningly tender to Pang Soo—even increasingly tender; clinging to her desperately, doing her rough peasant utmost to spoil still more the child she already had spoiled, unfitting her so for life's long fight, as far as such sturdy Chinese peasant stock can be unfitted for grind, patience and perseverance.

Any hour now Shu A-fah might return. Shu A-fah was straight of frame, and his face was not ill. Shu A-fah

might return as poor as he had gone. Delay was peril. Speed was impossible. To the average Chinese time is nothing, especially to the peasant. Even for her class Pang Kee was not quick-witted. Her experiences had been few, she had met—even to speak to a little—but few other people. But motherhood sharpens the heaviest minds. Essentially Chinese, she was even more woman than she was Chinese. Her longing for Pang Soo's betterment quickened her mind, made her impatient for the delay she was ill able to shorten. Marriage negotiations are long, and must take their course. But there was one thing she could do to expedite the contract she desired, and to cut down the match-making bill-of-costs which she knew would be as heavy and long as See Chee could make it.

She would procure the horoscopes herself. She knew that See Chee only had acquiesced in her suggestion to do so because the woman believed that she, Pang Kee, could not, had not the means.

She would make the attempt. If she failed, she failed. If she succeeded, See Chee could not demand payment for what she had scornfully relinquished to Pang Kee; and armed with such horoscopes, See Chee would have less excuse for delay, an incentive for immediately approaching I Yeh, and a stimulating hope of success and of the bridal fee itself.

How to obtain that fee was anxiety. Perhaps a usurer would lend it to the mother of so rich a man's bride. Perhaps the apothecary himself would surreptitiously supply it if he greatly sickened for love of Pang Soo. In some way it would have to be found; and it should.

The more immediate fee, without which See Chee certainly would not approach the apothecary's mother, was anxiety too; but she would find a way.

First she would attempt to get the horoscopes.

The temple was old, deplorably shabby, but of great sanctity. Its head-priest—incidentally its only priest—had

a great reputation. He could work miracles, or for him his god could and would. His charms often worked. The accuracy of his horoscopes was never questioned.

No peasant, few nobler, ever passed the Caterpillar-god's temple without prayer, dole or careful obeisance. It never occurred to any to repair or clean it, but they paid it every reverence.

The priest was said to be rich; and he might have been had he not loved opium and its poisoned dreams. He was decrepit, ragged, unwashed and a leper. But his reputation was enormous. Avarice sat on his shoulder and ruled him, as many of his clients knew and testified. But he had a twinkling eye—when opium did not glaze it or sharpen it unnaturally. And Pang Kee, who had had dealings with him when Pang Lee died, believed that to the poor his heart was kind.

The Caterpillar-god's temple straddled a steep, stony hill-path on the hut's other side, farther away than the City was. Its perched site was lonely. Except those who sought it, few ever journeyed that way. But all who came upon it tarried a little.

Pang Kee bade Pang Soo clad herself in her best when she had eaten well, and to bring melons from the melon patch, as many as her basket would hold: an inferior melon for them to share when they wearied and hungered and parched; and, to give to Woo Hsi the priest, the largest and best melon she could find, right in ripeness, elegantly marked, delicious of smell; the others to sell, if luck befriended them.

Pang Kee carried the basket of melons. Pang Soo carried her best shoes. She would put them on at the temple gate. To have worn and bruised them on the long rough journey would have been sacrilege and extravagance—much the same thing in a Chinese peasant's morality.

The way was long; because of the girl's binded feet it would be longer and more difficult. Pang Kee thought of pushing Pang Soo in the old wheelbarrow. But Pang Soo

refused its being attempted. And Pang Kee yielded. She usually did yield to Pang Soo. And the barrow was frail now; it needed repair, it missed the care and carpentering of watchful Shu A-fah. And truly, as Pang Soo said, it was not a barrow way that they were going. Shu A-fah himself scarcely could have driven the wheelbarrow that journey. On parts of it the barrow would have to be carried. "And," as Pang Soo reminded her mother, "the last time you pushed me in the wheelbarrow, over a smooth, straight path, to spare my useless golden-lilies, I had to get out and walk most of the way, and the sulky wheelbarrow had to be pushed and coaxed. We could not leave it at the wayside for thieves to find."

They walked side by side. Their pace was slow, because of Pang Soo's feet; they rested often, because of Pang Soo's feet.

About those feet the girl's feelings were mixed. She was proud of them, she loved their beauty, but she disliked their crippling, and she hated all that they put upon her mother's feebling strength.

But Pang Kee had but one feeling about her daughter's feet; she gloated over them; they were her intense pride; she loved them. Life had given her two golden things: the kind companionship of Pang Lee, and Pang Soo's feet. And, too, she herself had achieved the girl's lovely, elegant feet—a courtyard lady's feet! Fate had given her Pang Lee, and Kwan had made him good to her, but she herself had made Pang Soo's feet. Her pride and love were the artist's pride in an indisputable masterpiece. She would not have sold them for all the rice in China.

And the rice-craving, so long quiet, was pricking again.

The melon she intended a propitiatory gift to Woo Hsi, the Caterpillar-god's priest, was not the only tribute she was taking to him.

Two years ago, among much else, Shu A-fah had brought home from one of his acquisitive absences, a small store of

tiny yellow balls. He had not known what they were, still less had Pang Kee. But it seemed a pity to waste them. Pang Kee hoarded them thriftily.

One night, racked with craving, neither ginger nor camphor in her reach, she thought of the little yellowish pills, got them, ate one—praying they were not poison, hoping they were pills of magic. Had she been sure that they were harmless, Pang Soo would have had them for sweetmeats long ago. But Pang Kee ran no risks with treasured Pang Soo.

Craving rice, she put the pill in her mouth, and waited.

It was a miracle-pill!

Rice was forgotten.

Pang Kee stretched down on the quilted *k'ang*. Luxury wrapped her. Music censed her. Colors—rose, amethyst, ruby, gold, celestial blue—floated about her. She dreamed—in ecstasy. She was young. She was exceedingly beautiful. Men loved her. Men craved her. A soft-clad bent to caress her, his silks rustled amorously as he bent to caress her. Birds sang. Flowers bloomed. Tenderness held her close. She floated far on a cloud of rose, safe and close in the exquisite clasp of love that claimed and guarded. She trembled and was glad.

When she awoke she had no pain. No craving racked or touched her. She was rested, full of strength and hope.

After that Pang Kee guarded her pills well.

Only once since had she eaten one. Such a specific was not to be squandered.

She knew now what the pills were. Opium is not so scarce in Shantung as white rice is. By chance in the market-place she had heard just such pills described. She knew that her beneficent pellets were a decoction of poppy—not the uncooked opium that kills, but a harmless, skilfully treated amalgam such as carried beneath the tongue enables an India coolie to do incredible toil for incredible hours, without food or drink, and without ill-effect.

If she had had them when Pang Soo's feet were being squeezed, they would have saved the price of the suffering child's tiny pipefuls. Pang Soo had no need of opium now, and Pang Kee kept them for herself; her first selfishness—until to-day.

To-day she was laying that one treasured selfishness at Pang Soo's feet; gladly giving up her one luxury, her unfailing panacea, in her service of the little girl-babe that in its birth hour she had thought to let Zut Qu bury alive. In her shriveled bosom she was carrying three of the precious pills to Woo Hsi the priest, who, it was said, loved opium even more ardently than he loved the Caterpillar-god whose altar he had served for seventy years.

The melon would please him, Pang Kee believed. The three opium pills would bribe and win him, she had little doubt. If necessary, she would promise him more for the horoscopes she wished him to draw for her. Uneducated, dull-witted Pang Kee had thought out the way to get from Woo Hsi the auspicious horoscopes that should potently facilitate the marriage of Pang Soo, her only child, and I Wing, the rich apothecary.

They trudged on.

When the path was roughest, least like a path, Pang Kee carried Pang Soo—carried her on her back, and carried her in her arms. Both were a feat and heroism. The basket added to the awkwardness and difficulty. But the indomitable peasant mother did it—slowly, painfully, often gasping and trembling.

Pang Soo never forgot it!

She protested. The mother would not be denied. Pang Soo yielded because she had to yield.

In the after years Pang Soo often would remember, feel her mother's arms about her here, feel her mother's back bent beneath her own sturdy young weight. And more than once, remembering to-day, remembering the indomitability of Pang Kee's mother-love, Pang Soo would stiffen in purpose and in endurance, refuse to fail, go on to a

hard road's end; think of to-day and determine tenderly never to give up, until she had accomplished it, her quest for rice—white rice for Pang Kee.

CHAPTER XIX

WHILE they ate their "snack" Pang Kee rested a little at the gate of the Caterpillar-god's temple. Rough, toil-coarsened, anxious, dull of mind, yet—because she was Chinese—the place, its quiet and the picture it centered refreshed and gladdened her.

The trees were aflame, but the willows kept their clear soft green. The trees were everywhere here, safe from the charcoal-burner's slaughter, safe in the temple's sacred precinct. A tree-harp, slung on a sycamore branch, rippled its dainty music as the soft breeze thrummed it. The great bronze bell at the temple gateway was silent, but the mallet hung beside it; you were free to strike it, if you wished to summon the Caterpillar-god or the god's priest attendants. And when the now neglected, one-priest fane had kept its apex state a score of priests had served its altar. The long, low house that had housed them was roofless now, its crumbled walls were a jungle of lusty wild flowers and fruit-heavy blackberry vines. The roof of the temple itself was breached here and there, but fairly rainproof still, for moss and vines and criss-crossing climbing bamboo patched the holes. There were vistas of natural loveliness between the trees. Woo Hsi's house was a mat shed, tattered and grimed. Fire-flowers grew thick about it, and rioted redly over it. A happy brook gurgled beyond the cabbage patch—seemingly the priest's only larder, except for the blackberries and the persimmons and lychees that dangled from a matted clump of trees. The sky was soft as silk crêpe, blue as the forget-me-nots that flanked the brook. Wild white roses snow-flaked the ground, there were violets still—many Chinese flowers take as little heed

of time as the human Chinese do—and the violets were sweet.

Rested, and strong again, because she had feasted on the glowing picture of the fragrant spot, Pang Kee rose and went through the red-roofed gate, across the courtyard, into the temple.

She did not strike the bronze bell; her business was not with the god, but with Woo Hsi the man, in his more secular occupation of horoscope divination. She knew where to find him. She had no wish to wake him if he slept. It might serve her purpose ill to do that. She would wait until Woo Hsi woke—no matter how long.

Pang Kee carried a melon—the best one—with her. The rest she had arranged beside the gate, attractively placed, well out of the sun, Pang Soo squatted beside them, her best red shoes on now, her wee feet carefully displayed, a fresh flower in her coat, fresh nosegays behind each ear; as pretty a saleswoman as ever was seen in Shantung—the mother thought.

Woo Hsi was awake, and—Kwan be thanked!—in his friendliest humor, playing patience at the Caterpillar-god's dingy votive table.

He accepted the melon graciously. And when he had thumbed and prodded it hard, and had sniffed it shrewdly, he thanked the woman for it.

Pang Kee squatted down beside him, a short but respectful distance from his feet, and told him her errand.

She told it more directly than a Chinese often tells anything, unless violently, explosively angry. Her way back home was long, she was impatient for his answer, and she was shrewd enough to seize his pleasant mood before it went or waned.

The old priest hesitated, but not overlong. He haggled, but neither much nor cruelly.

It would be difficult, but it might be that his skill could accomplish it.

"How much?" the woman asked.

"Two price. One price now. A second price four times more, if the stars are kind."

"How much, great holy-one?"

Woo Hsi considered it, an unwashed hand fumbling his unwashed chin, his sly eyes narrow on her scant whitening hair and her coarse, worn clothes. But there was kindness, too, in his wizened monkey-like face, the melon had pleased him. He had finished the game of cards, and he had won it. Interruption had not been unwelcome. Time sometimes crawled and was heavy here in the Caterpillar Temple.

"A fourth part of a small *shoe* now. A *shoe*, if the stars yield the horoscopes as you wish them to be," he told her at last.

Pang Kee shivered.

"Half, holy-one," she begged. "And I entreat you, give me time to gather the coins. I have none to-day."

"Why came you then? To waste my sacred time? To mock the god?"

"Nay, holy-one! But because my sore need would not wait, and because you are unmatched in goodness to the poor."

"Flattery is tawdry payment. Only scoundrels offer it, only fools accept it."

"Truth-words do not flatter, eminent and older-than-time priest of the distinguished god of the Caterpillars. You chanted at my husband's funeral, you censed his grave, my husband Pang Lee the toy-maker. And you charged me no price. You gave us your charity—gave it to me, your wretched worm, and to the honorable Pang Lee, who is my lord."

"An excellent reason why you should pay this time!"

"I will swear, here before the god to pay in time."

"It must be quick time," Woo Hsi grumbled. "The stars like not those who are slow, slippery perhaps, to pay; the Caterpillar-god likes such debtors even less, curses them."

The woman bowed her head meekly.

"Old-old, good-one!" she begged.

"Is the girl as fair as you say?"

"She is very fair, the lily of all maidens!"

"Accomplished, you say? Fitted to be the mother of a gentleman's sons?"

"Greatly accomplished. Truly fitted. None could deny it."

"Is she good?"

"Pure as a vestal of Kwan. Good as the spirit of heavenly goodness."

"A good daughter to you?"

"She lights my days." Even in the temple dusk the man saw the glow that came on the mother's face.

"You must pay me something now! Have you not a coin?"

"Not one coin." Pang Kee's voice convinced him.

"You should not have come," he grumbled.

"Holy-one, I have better than coin—"

"A jewel?"

"Pills."

"Poppy?" he asked eagerly. Then, checking himself, "Inferior poppy!" the priest scoffed, but his eyes were eager. "How much? Where?"

Pang Kee told him of what the pills had wrought for her, told him the flowers it had made, the dreams it had woven—told it all too eloquently. Woo Hsi crouched towards her as she told it; his fingers trembled, his loose lips watered.

Their bargaining did not take long now.

The horoscopes were promised.

Pang Kee gave the pills that were her salvation from pain and incredible longing. She told him that she had no more. But she knew that he knew that she lied. She knew that before he gave her the horoscopes he would exact every grain she had of the precious drug, and knew that she would yield it to him.

And her heart sang as she left the temple, and went back to Pang Soo—the selfless heart of a Chinese mother.

Pang Kee looked at their wares with dismay.

"Not one sold—yes, one. Only one! The smallest!"

Pang Soo laughed, her pearl teeth flashing white between her lovely red lips. "Only one! The smallest!" she agreed.

She opened a pink-lined palm.

"He paid well," the girl said triumphantly.

Pang Kee knelt down with an incredulous cry, to look the closer at the gold in Pang Soo's hand.

"Kwan!" the woman gasped.

Then her face clouded. Had Shu A-fah come back—too soon? Her face cleared a little. If Shu A-fah had, he had come back rich indeed. There were three coins snuggled in Pang Soo's upturned, dimpled palm.

"Who-one?" Pang Kee demanded.

"I Wing the apothecary," Pang Soo answered demurely.

Pang Kee moaned in sheer ecstasy.

Truly Kwan Yin had befriended them to-day. Gold more than she had ever thought to see. Three gold coins, each larger than the one Shu A-fah had sent! The horoscopes promised, highly favorable horoscopes! The apothecary deeply in love with Pang Soo! Only a man drunken with love and desire could commit the exceedingly foolish extravagance of paying three heavy gold pieces for a one-*cash* melon, an almost inferior melon.

Suddenly her face changed again.

"You blundered," she moaned. "You should have given him the melon. You should have given him the best of your melons, girl! Given him the melon and refused payment—money payment. You should not have taken his coin."

"Rest you tranquil, mother-one. Men like to do their own hunting."

Pang Kee gasped. Where had the child, maiden-minded, inexperienced, learned that? It was true, Pang Kee believed, though she never before had thought about it. Life had left the peasant woman little time for such speculations, experience taught her little philosophy; millet, salt,

a little firewood, a coarse garment now and then, her entire preoccupation.

"He chose the melon he wished to have—if he wished to have one."

"Why should he purchase a melon, if he did not wish to have one?"

Pang Soo laughed.

"Did he take it away himself, or give it to his servant to carry?"

"He was alone. He did not take it away."

Pang Kee looked about, searching the ground near them. A man who paid three gold coins for one inferior melon might neglect to take it with him when he went. If so, they could sell it again, or eat it themselves.

There was no sign of the highly sold melon.

"He ate it here?"

"We ate it. I had most of it. I have kept the seeds to dry and crack, or to plant when planting time comes again. But to crack and eat, I think; it was not a very good melon. But I saved the seeds." She tilted the basket, that Pang Kee might see the seeds on a leaf at the bottom.

"But it was good enough to eat, both flesh and rind," Pang Kee protested.

"The apothecary ate no rind, nor did I."

"Where is the rind?" Pang Kee demanded anxiously.

"Beyond the persimmon trees. I Wing threw it far. He has a good arm."

Pang Kee scrambled up grunting, and hurried to the persimmon and lychee clump, searching there until she had found all the small melon's rind. She put it with the seeds. It was not appetizing, but it was edible; and dried it would burn.

"He shared it with you, Pang Soo?"

"He gave me most of it." Pang Kee's weather-beaten face glowed. "It was not a number-one good melon."

"Chut," shrugged Pang Kee. Then, "He spoke with you, Pang Soo?"

"He looked more than he spoke. The apothecary's eyes are kinder than his voice. There is no music in his voice."

"Rich men can buy music, hire musicians to make music for them."

"I disliked his voice. It was harsh and yet weak. A man's voice should ring."

Pang Kee frowned. She knew how perverse Pang Soo could be, and how persistently stubborn. O Kwan!

"Stayed he long?"

"He ate slowly."

"What said he?"

" 'The day is hot. Melons are pleasant to eat. The day is hot!' " The girl drawled it harshly, mimicking an unpleasant voice impishly.

Pang Kee sighed.

"Asked he your name? Your father's name?"

"The apothecary asked no question."

"Did he look at your feet?"

"He looked at my feet," she stuck them out as she spoke, and they both eyed them approvingly. "He did not dislike my lilies. He looked longest at my face. I think he liked it better. Oh, he saw me, mother-one. The apothecary covered me with his eyes. He swallowed a mouthful of melon seeds, and did not know that he had."

"He desires you. He will come to you again!"

"How can he come to me, when he does not know where I live?"

For an instant Pang Kee looked dismayed. Then she said with an exultant smile, "He will find you."

Pang Soo shrugged.

"I like him less than I did, mother-one. He lacks wit, I think. He has an ugly wart on his nose. His fortune is the best of I Wing the apothecary."

Pang Kee's tired eyes blazed with anger. She raised a clenched fist, but it struck her own knee when she let it fall; and she began to cry—slow, hard tears, slow, hard sobs.

The girl's face softened instantly.

"Be tranquil, my mother-one," she said, her little hand tender on the mother's coarse sleeve. "Never will I keep peace from your grave-close years. A rice-rich lord would have beauty of face, the voice of a lute and the wit of the god-of-literature, even if he had three warts on his nose. Be at peace, dear mother-one. Pang Soo is not ungrateful, and she loves you well."

"And you would love wealth, my lovely lily-one—wealth and ease?"

"More than all else," the girl answered promptly. "But, mother-one, build not too splendid an edifice on it, plan not the courtyards, count not the retinue. He may not come again. I think he will not come again."

But Pang Kee was happy now, and confident. She could not be warned from it.

Their going home was glad.

They went very slowly, for Pang Soo would not let her mother carry her again.

And Kwan kept her hand on them still. They sold all the melons as they went, by no means for gold, or yet for silver, but profitably.

When they reached the hut the velvet night wore all its jewels, a thousand thousand stars, and the big moon laughed down on the hovel-home, where the faithful chained cat, on guard there, slept contentedly at the black threshold-stone, and the night-time wild flowers breathed sweetness.

And Pang Soo's tame pet garden-frog hopped from under a stone and croaked them a welcome.

CHAPTER XX

FEVERISH weeks followed.

Pang Kee was working desperately, earning a coin or its value in kind here, saving the fraction of a coin there, that she might the sooner have the sum without which See

Chee, the go-between, would not approach the apothecary's mother.

She had gold, to be sure, four gold pieces now, and some that were silver, in her underground hiding-place; but these she was furious to keep for Pang Soo's bride-clothes. The bridegroom and the bridegroom's mother might volunteer to supply them, they might not; she could drive no bargain with them. A marriage so preponderously advantageous to the bride must be sought meekly, accepted on any terms that the groom and his mother would grant. And Pang Soo could not go to the courtyard of I Wing unplenished. Unless the delay were too long, Pang Kee would let nothing force her to break into her secret hoard except for the bridal fineries of Pang Soo. She would earn the matchmaker's fee, would earn more quickly than she ever had earned before.

Pang Kee did. Kwan befriended her.

And Pang Soo aided all that she could, allowed to do more than Pang Kee ever before had let her; all that did not damage her nails or threaten her beautiful feet.

Pang Kee ate little, scanted her sleep, did work that was filthy and work that was dangerous, did it with gleaming eyes, her set face growing daily thinner and sharper, her muscles inhumanly steeled. When quivering endurance warned her that it was threatened, she tucked a pill in her cheek, and endurance stiffened again. Not once did Pang Kee think of rice.

Pang Soo slept all her due of sleep hours. Her food was plenty. Pang Soo sang as she worked. And the sound of her happy flute-like singing strengthened Pang Kee as much as the opium did, and inspired and quickened her more.

She had many pills still, more than a score. She only allowed herself one when she knew that without one she must slacken, earn less, eat and rest more. She saved every pellet she could for Woo Hsi. She knew that he would ferret them out, and would exact them from her

before he gave her the horoscopes. She would not grudge them to him. Easy to pay him so. The pills were useful only to her. Every coin she gathered and saved could be used for Pang Soo.

When she had ready the matchmaker's price she would go to the Caterpillar Temple and carry with her the pills that remained, and would pay them to the priest in exchange for the precious favorable horoscopes, the valuable horoscopes that would be Pang Soo's charter to such splendid marriage. The paying of the priest troubled Pang Kee not at all. She thanked Kwan that the holy man had the opium craving. That she never again could quiet her own craving—her craving for rice—troubled her as little.

But Pang Kee did not have to go to the temple.

Woo Hsi had tested the pills that she already had paid him. He had found them much to his liking, as good as the woman had said, and, greatly to his appreciation, leaving neither headache nor quivering nausea to embitter the morning after. He was quite willing to forgo all other payment, if Pang Kee could pay him with generous more of such opium. He had no doubt that she could. She certainly should. He did not overrate her intelligence, but she was not a fool, her planning the aid of the horoscopes and his aid in their drawing disproved her a fool—foolish as was her hope that she could secure the apothecary for her own son-in-law. Only a peculiarly foolish fool would have parted with all she had of such pills as readily as she relinquished the three pills to him. He wanted them all. And he wished, too, to learn how and where she had procured them. He did not suppose she had any great store of them. He wished to get, if he could, enough to last him his lifetime.

He drew the horoscopes hurriedly. But he drew them with care and skill. And the pipe-sodden old priest was an artist. Even when his hand shook, the brush he loved steadied it. His sense of line and sense of color were ex-

quisite. He gave his best—of artistry if not of truth—to the horoscopes of I Wing and Pang Soo.

He began them as soon as he woke from the first sleep the pills of Pang Kee gave him. The god went undusted—as it often did. The litter on the temple floor was not broomed into inconspicuous corners. He gave himself to ecstasy at dusk, gave himself to the beautiful horoscopes at dawn, tending them as lovingly as he always did the temple courtyard.

Leper, opium-slave, nefarious in much, lazy as well as sore of body, the old solitary, because of its beauty never neglected his temple courtyard.

The courtyard was small, but few courtyards in all China were more beautiful.

Gleam of bronze, scent of lilies, jeweled fish in the long, narrow lotus-tank, the great bell gray-green as lichens, beautifully carved as the Elgin Marbles, nothing crowded, a sense of space, the hush of peace, the pulsing red of the three-roofed gate, the intricately chiseled and cut old gray wall lightly frothed here and there with wild flowers that peeped and trailed from its stones: this and more was the temple courtyard of Woo Hsi. Sunlight splashed and gilded the mosaic pavement whose burnished colors were softened by the lovely pointed shadows of bamboo, shadows of oleanders and of honeysuckle.

No wonder that the song-birds loved and wooed it. Small wonder that old Woo Hsi loved it, cherished it, tended it devotedly. In his not always clean, ungainly body was a Chinese soul, the soul of an artist who worshiped Nature more sincerely than he worshiped his god.

Woo Hsi wore his leprosy lightly. It had not disfigured him—yet. And as yet it threatened him but scarcely pained him.

Except when his opium-greed gnawed him, the unfriended old priest was not unhappy. Alone, he never was lonely; the artist rarely is lonely, he has great companionship always.

Squatting in the temple courtyard, he drew the horoscopes deftly.

He must have known the stars and their counter-influences profoundly, to have so little need to consult them as he limned and brushed the auspicious-for-marriage horoscopes of the pretty hut-girl and the rich apothecary.

The horoscopes were masterpieces: vermilion, and gold-leaf, azure and emerald all of the best. European encroachment and example had not debauched with aniline the colors of China then. These nefarious horoscopes—for the bribed old diviner blithely exaggerated the auspiciousness of the stars—were works of very fine art, bouquets of color, lyrics of harmony, every line delicate and masterly.

Three pills did not last Woo Hsi long. He speeded the pronouncement of the stars, and he speeded the horoscopes. It had cost no effort, and but little time to learn the birth-hour of I Wing, half the city folk knew it; Pang Kee had told him the birth-time of Pang Soo.

Pang Soo was braiding a mat of reeds, watching their tiny crop of cotton as she did so, when Woo Hsi came to the lonely hut. The day and the girl made a beautiful picture. The priest paused and studied it.

The eyes of the celibate kindled, the heart of an artist leapt. Great as the odds against it, just possibly the peasant mother *might*—with his aid—accomplish her tremendous, fantastic ambition. Rich I Yeh might do worse than accept such radiant beauty for the mother of her grandsons.

He left the picture reluctantly, and went in to Pang Kee.

She divined why he had come.

"I have paused at your elegant palace, eminent Pang Kee, since I was passing it—I have business in the City—to show you what will gladden your eyes," he began.

"My worm-infected hovel will smell sweet from your

holy presence forever," Pang Kee exclaimed as she gave him obeisance.

But again they wasted little time on the elaborate preliminaries that Chinese courtesy and etiquette enjoin. The priest had eaten his last of the opium pills, he ached for another. Pang Kee itched for the horoscopes.

She could not suppress a cry when she saw them. When he deciphered them to her she fell at his feet.

The game was to Woo Hsi.

Pang Soo, watching, saw him go almost as soon as he came—and wondered.

She had guessed his errand, guessed something of its nature. But she knew how tight her mother kept clutch of every coin; she did not know of the precious pills. She had expected the interview to be long.

Pang Kee put up short and feeble defense against the priest's demand.

She lied, of course, about the quantity of pills she had, confessing to less than her half. Woo Hsi would have despised her if she had not.

It did not take him long to wring the truth out of her. She was more greedy to have the horoscopes than he was to get the pills. He would not give her the horoscopes until she had sworn to Kwan Yin—an oath no Chinese mother will break or misswear—that these were all.

They parted in mutual friendliness, not grudge. The woman who had surrendered to him her one and great solace was grateful to him. He was jubilant for the opium hoard in his now heavy wallet, but, too, Woo Hsi was sad; sad that she had not known where or how Shu A-fah had procured them. For he knew that these scarcely would last him his life out, even if he ate but one each moon—and that would be difficult.

And she did not know where Shu A-fah was, or when he would come again—if he came. But she was confident that Shu A-fah would. The priest hoped that he might come soon.

The *mei-jên* was furious.

Pang Kee regretted that she had told her. She had thought that having the horoscopes, and that they were so greatly auspicious, would spur See Chee to immediate approach of the apothecary's mother. But See Chee foamed at the mouth, cursed Pang Kee, and threatened to cancel the bargain. She had intended to buy such horoscopes herself and to have a fat commission for doing it, a treble commission in fact; one from Pang Kee, one from I Yeh, and one from the horoscope diviner she employed.

They parted in wrath.

But Pang Kee, though balked for the moment by the matchmaker's threatened defalcation, was not greatly dejected.

She still lacked part of the fee she had promised to pay See Chee in advance. By the time she was ready to pay, she believed that the other would carry out their bargain. She could not conceive that the *mei-jên* would turn away from actual money. "More dogs bark than bite," she reflected.

If worse came to worst, if the inconceivable happened, there were other matchmakers in the City, though none of whom she knew with the great reputation of the go-between See Chee.

Pang Kee chuckled twice as she trudged back from the *mei-jên's* inhospitable house.

And she set her slow wits to work hard to circumvent the usurious one.

She wished she could do the *mei-jên's* office herself, save the *mei-jên's* extortionate wage, recite Pang Soo's beauties, accomplishments, and virtues herself. What go-between could do it so well, who knew them so well? Pang Kee wished that it were possible to dispense with the services of See Chee.

It was impossible.

A matchmaker is so nearly indispensable to Chinese betrothal and marriage that to attempt to do without one

would be an affront to the family of the apothecary. Such an unequal match required the nicest handling, one iota of bungling probably would thwart and wreck it. And all the city knew that I Yeh was a stickler, devout and strict in her observance of etiquette, relentless in exacting it from others. And it was well known that, though kind and generous to them, I Yeh was unbending to those who were her inferiors.

Pang Kee was immeasurably inferior to Madame I.

Pang Kee sighed. It would have been her great satisfaction to have seen the *chia* of rich I Wing—if only to have stood in one of the inner courtyards and feasted her eyes and her mother-heart on the outside of the elegant house. It would have been a moment and a memory to treasure.

Peasant Pang Kee knew—though she had dreamed it—how unlikely it was that she ever would be admitted to the home of the apothecary's wife; scarcely possible that on or after the marriage day she ever would be allowed to pass through even the outermost gate. Other peasant-ones might pass through that gate, on legitimate errands or business, or permitted by the easy good-nature of the apothecary's mother to do so—but not the peasant mother of the rich man's wife.

Pang Kee sighed again—and trudged on steadily.

CHAPTER XXI

HER wits worked.

It took them some time; but they worked to a double purpose.

Pang Kee chuckled delightedly.

She had not thought of Zut Qu's cup for many a moon.

She thought of it now. She thought of it suddenly, and chuckled.

The cup should serve her as excuse to go to the lady

I Yeh, not to attempt to sell it—she knew that the cup was almost worthless, a poor peasant thing. But she would ask I Yeh's advice about it, pretending that she thought it might be of more value than it looked. And she would say that "because the gracious-one is far-famed for kindness," she begged her to judge it, advise her what to ask for it, and what sum not to sell it for less than, "if by chance it is worth enough to justify offering it to T'ring Lun," who only bought or sold things of merit. He was proud of his merchant reputation.

And if by chance it was worth a piece of silver, sell it to T'ring Lun she would. She lacked little now of See Chee's preliminary price. One more silver coin would almost complete the needed sum. And without touching her hoard for Pang Soo's bride-clothes!

When she had brought it back from the earthquake holocaust of Zut Qu's cavern, she had resolved to keep it as long as she lived, to keep it in loyal remembering of Zut Qu who had so befriended her, and had so befriended infant Pang Soo, baby lily-one.

She valued it for Zut Qu's sake. She never had used it, not presuming to drink out of the vessel that Zut Qu had used. She kept it in love and reverence, kept it in gratitude. But, too, she thriftily kept it, never trying to sell or barter it, because she believed that it was worthless, and scarcely would bring the meanest coin, scarcely could be traded for an ounce of salt. It was piety to keep so intimate a memento of great Zut Qu, a thing that the old wizard-one had used commonly. But, if it had been more worth selling, not to sell it would have been indefensible extravagance.

Pang Kee loved the cup for its once owner's sake, disliked it for its own. She thought it ugly, its shape clumsy, its dull colorlessness offensive, drab as a widow's robe but with none of such robe's significance. Or rather this was what Pang Kee *felt;* she did not think about it.

She put the cup safely away and forgot about it, as her toil-crowded years passed.

All else that she had brought from the cave she had sold long ago—all except such things as she saw might enrich Pang Soo's marriage-basket when Pang Soo's bride-time came.

Yesterday suddenly she had remembered it, and conceived the idea of showing the worthless thing to Madame I, asking a foolish question about it—an admirable excuse, she considered, to see once the house of her child's wife-years, breathe once, the perfumed air of the heaven's-well that would be I Soo's, the bride of I Wing.

And yet—was it quite worthless, unsalable? Zut Qu had liked rich things, and Zut Qu was rich and had denied herself nothing.

If it were more valuable than she could believe, Kwan had befriended her again, Kwan Yin and Zut Qu!

She bathed as she had not bathed for years. Pang Kee never had seen a bathtub. But she knew that ladies, the wives of rich lords, bathed every day, kept themselves very clean. Pang Soo did! From her birth Pang Kee had had Pang Soo do that. Pang Kee washed herself until she shone, then she washed herself again—to wear smarting patches of skinless flesh for several troubled days. One patch didn't heal for a moon.

She smoothed her scant eyebrows, then tidied her whitening hair very carefully. She scalded the dirt out from under her finger-nails. Her nails were so worn down by the work her hands had done—would do till she died—that they could be cleaned in no other way.

She disguised the poverty of her garments as best she could. She put on new shoes over a new pair of fair white stockings, she reblackened her head-band until it shone. She borrowed Pang Soo's garnet and agate ring, but she couldn't wear it, it would not go on her smallest finger. She borrowed Pang Soo's ear-rings, twice the size of her

own tiny threads-of-gold ones; they went into her ear-holes over-easily, and she wore them.

She bettered herself as best she could, put the cup, wrapped in a piece of clean stuff, in her bosom, and made her way to the home of I Wing the apothecary.

The Chinese woman walked slowly. She feared she had started too early. When the house was in sight she hurried nervously, almost running, fearing she was late, late to find the lady at home and at leisure.

How to get into the outer gate? Its size and its decorations awed her. But she would find a way. She would not be thrust back!

The gateman received her courteously, even with punctilious respect. The peasant woman's white hair ensured her that.

Yes, his mistress was within. He called another servant. He gave Pang Kee a stool to sit on while she waited to hear if the mistress would see her.

Pang Kee was glad to sit down. Her heart was beating anxiously.

While she waited for the second servant's return she looked about her, devoured the outer courtyard with her eyes—the eyes of Pang Soo's mother.

Pang Kee had expected a fine establishment. She never had conceived that a dwelling-place could be as fine as this one. Were the palaces in the Purple Forbidden City finer, more splendid than this?

Her throat hurt her.

She was glad that she had come, but she wished that she had not.

Subtle perceptions were not often peasant Pang Kee's. But the unaccustomed stir and excitement reached her. The *chia* was stirred, teeming with gay urgency; it bristled with hustle. The outer courtyard was full of servants. Messengers were coming and going. There was a pleasant air of forthcoming festivity, a strong atmosphere of importance about the place. Every servant appeared to have

something to do, and moreover to be doing it sturdily.

But all was quiet in the courtyard of I Yeh when Pang Kee reached it.

For I Yeh had consented at once to receive the old peasant woman. When Pang Kee saw the excitement, felt the expectancy at the threshold of the home, she had feared that she had come at an inauspicious time, and that I Yeh, reputed an admirable housemistress, would not spare time or good nature to see her. But the servant the gatekeeper sent came back at once, smiled and bade Pang Kee come with him.

The rambled house stretched far. To see the more of it and of the courtyards they crossed, Pang Kee followed the servant boy as slowly as she could. Her narrow eyes widened at every step. This was a maze of luxury and wealth. Amazement dazed her at last.

Her daughter's home.

The woman's delight and joy were suffocating. No thought of the long lonely years when she might not come here, might not come to the outer gate, lest a peasant mother disgrace a rich man's wife, shame his children, spoiled her exultant pleasure. She blessed every tendril on every vine, every yellow grain on the sanded paths. She knelt to Kwan.

The ladies' courtyard was very still. The lotus lake slept under the coverlet of broad green leaves up from which the lotus flowers of many colors stood as motionless as lilies carved from marble.

One side of the courtyard opened wide into the house. Beside the intricately carved walls of the courtyard's other sides, splendid cacti were in splendid bloom: twisted spiked cactus plants as handsome as they were fantastic, heavily aflower with almost rose-like blossoms of rose, rose-red, deep blood red, amber and orange; ragged petaled some, all with long pointed buds nearing full flower or just hinting it. I Yeh had a passion for cactus plants. One, the rarest here, grew in a porcelain tub beside her bench, its

great blossoms of vivid blue a lovely softness on its thick, odd-shaped, weapon-like leaves.

A slave-girl, squat beside the cactus tub, slept over her lute at her mistress' feet.

For I Yeh was here, a picture of plump content, richly garbed, jeweled, indolent on the stone bench, her pipe idle beside her on her idle embroidery-frame.

I Yeh looked at the peasant woman and smiled. She did not speak.

A magnificent white cockatoo, perched near his mistress' shoulder, ruffled his lemon crest lazily, and the lacquered chain that tethered him clattered indifferently as he half glanced at Pang Kee.

There was no other sound.

Pang Kee was content to wait. She looked about hungrily, storing a rich memory in her mind. She would not come here again.

The serving-boy wiped with his sleeve an atom of dust off a white ivory stool, and waited close by the bench, waited to hear the stranger's errand and all that might be said—curious and friendly.

Unless commanded to go, Chinese servants are privileged to linger and hear.

I Yeh was neither curious nor impatient. But Pang Kee waited so long without a word that at last I Yeh spoke. But first she drew the embroidery-frame on to her knee, so making a space for Pang Kee.

"Honor me by sitting down." The peasant woman was the older. She bowed, with her hands in her sleeves, not so uncouth as to be discourteous, and sat down as a right.

"What would you?" I Yeh asked. "Smoke as you tell me." A dozen pipes lay on a table at her hand; she filled one, lit it and gave it to Pang Kee, filled and lit her own jeweled pipe, and waited.

Pang Kee smoked, gestured her thanks, and laid down the emptied pipe. Three long breaths had exhausted the tiny thing.

"Delicious!" the peasant woman said.

"It is abominable tobacco. I am ashamed to have offered it to you," I Yeh said politely.

Pang Kee denied that, protesting as politely.

"Again?"

But Pang Kee would not smoke again. She drew the small cloth-wrapped parcel from her bosom.

The cockatoo snatched at it. But Pang Kee was guarding it well. I Yeh cuffed the snowy feathers, and commanded the boy to take the bird away. The servant obeyed by taking the cockatoo and snuggling it against his own face. He leaned over the high back of the stone seat, to watch the better what the woman should show.

Pang Kee unwrapped the cup slowly, with great care.

I Yeh stirred her slave-girl with an imperative, kindly foot. "Play!"

The girl woke and laughed and picked up her lute. She played at once, a whisper of tinkled music, slight but silver sweet, her eyes curious, too, on what the stranger-one was doing.

I Yeh laid the embroidery-frame on the small table, refilled her pipe and smoked again. She continued to smoke, a fresh pipeful every few moments, while Pang Kee told her story, carefully edited.

"When my years were long ago more few, a great-one gave this worm-one her patronage. This drink-cup was hers. She gave it to me when the Dragon came for her. With it she gave me a flask of sacred wine. The flask is empty. I would sell the cup."

"Where is the flask?" the servant boy asked.

"Alas, it is broken. My uneducated eyes," she told I Yeh, "do not see great value, see no beauty in this small cup of mine. But she who gave it to me was of great wealth. For that reason, and because it was her habit to use only articles of value, I believe that the cup is worth many coins. I would know its true-right sell-price before

I carry it to T'ring Lun the dealer and bid him make barter for it with me. Will you tell me its value?"

I Yeh laid down her pipe, and took the cup in her hands. She studied and fingered it. Then she looked at Pang Kee.

"It *is* yours?" she asked.

"It truly is mine, great lady."

"Go until I summon you back," I Yeh commanded the boy. "Take the bird with you."

Po Lee obeyed reluctantly. He threw a hard look at the slave-girl. "Listen with care," it signaled, "that you may repeat it to me with exactness." And the girl was not loath.

Alas! "Play not so near, girl. Your strings smite my ears rudely. Go sit under the oleander; it will sound to me more sweet from that distance."

The slave-girl shrugged and obeyed. She did not dare disobey. No servant of I Wing dared to disobey his mother.

"Sell it carefully," I Yeh told Pang Kee. "The cup is of great value."

Pang Kee gasped, before she remembered herself. "I hoped that it might be," she said. "It was inconceivable that the great-one so cherished what was mean."

"Do not carry it to T'ring Lun; he cannot afford to buy it."

Pang Kee gasped again, her head buzzed.

"What coin is its value?" she begged when she could speak.

"Many gold pieces at least. I cannot say with more exactness."

"Is it a magic cup, lady-one?"

"Not that to my knowing. But to my sureness it is mutton-fat jade; the jade that she who rules in the Vermilion Sacred City so loves, the favorite jade—of all jades —of her whose name we may not speak. It will give you wealth. It requires polishing—very carefully should that

be done. It is smeared and dulled. But it is priceless—of great price."

"Gracious-one, are you sure?" Pang Kee's voice trembled. "You mistake not?"

"As sure as we are that Kwan is kind."

The peasant woman sobbed.

"My honorable father collected jade. He had master-knowing of it. He taught me to know it. I have many beautiful jades that he gave me when I left him to come here a bride."

She laid the cup in Pang Kee's shriveled hand.

"To whom shall I carry it? How may I, who am ignorant, know that he to whom I sell does not rob me too greatly?"

I Yeh considered.

"I will learn—learn both," she promised at last.

"Will you keep it for me until I come again? My house is poor and frail. I have no treasure-place."

"I dare not. I dare not keep so costly a gem that is not my own. You yourself must guard it. Guard it well! Bring it to me again when I send for you, when I have more freedom of time, and I will find for you its right worth, and learn for you to whom you must take it for fair-fair selling. I lack the time now. Our great affairs fill all my hours. I wish I could buy it myself," she added longingly. "What will you do with your wealth, venerable old-one?"

"Give it my daughter, her dower."

"It will wed her well! But keep enough to comfort your own years. Have you but one daughter?"

"The lily-one is my only child."

"I, too, have but one," the other said.

Bold, because I Yeh spoke so kindly, Pang Kee let loose her eager tongue, and told dotingly the beauty, the charms, the virtues of Pang Soo.

I Yeh was patient, but scarcely listened.

"Go you now," she said when Pang Kee paused for

breath. "Tell the gatekeeper your name, tell him where your home. He shall send for you when I can give you some time. I wish I could buy your cup. That I cannot do. My purse is strained; the honest purchase of your cup would empty it. But I will find you a good selling of it. I am poor-poor now. I shall be poorer when all the wedding cost is paid. Next moon my son's bride comes to him. His betrothal gifts to her have cost a fortune. The bridal fête will cost another. But she who comes is worth it, and I Wing's happiness to me is worth more. She is of a great house of learning and wealth. I have seen her. I journeyed to Swatow to see her, to examine her well, before I accepted the offer of betrothal her father sent. She is exceedingly beautiful. I Wing will love her well. She is exceedingly healthy. She will bear him splendid sons. And I shall like her well enough. Kwan be with you!"

The rich woman rose and went leisurely toward her apartments, leaving her pipes and embroidery-frame for some servant to gather up and bring in to her.

I Yeh did not notice that the peasant woman made no reply, did not even rise. But the girl still luting under the oleander tree saw and was shocked.

The rich woman went idly in to her cushioned ease.

The poor woman sat alone on the stone bench, stunned, and suffered dumbly.

CHAPTER XXII

PANG KEE looked about her desperately as she rose, scanning the rich family's house and the delicious courtyard with hot angry eyes. This jewel-courtyard was the perfect setting for her jewel-daughter. And it never would be Pang Soo's.

The other marriage would take place. Chinese wedlock sometimes is annulled by divorce; a Chinese betrothal must be carried out; Pang Kee never had heard of a broken, dis-

honored betrothal. I Wing would marry the maiden for whom the bridal-feast was already preparing. A marriage was still to seek for Pang Soo!

Pang Kee limped out of the courtyard, through the great gate, physically lamed by the blow that I Yeh unwittingly had dealt her.

The peasant woman's disappointment was as bitter as her dream had been; fantastic, fatuous. Almost as bitter as the disappointing fact itself was the bitterness of having to disclose it to Pang Soo. Pang Soo knew nothing of where she had gone to-day, or why. But the lily-one must be told of I Wing's approaching irrevocable marriage. And she herself must tell Pang Soo, lest Pang Soo hear it from some one else, and, surprised, betray what it would mean to her. She, the mother, must strike the child she adored.

That Pang Soo might not care did not cross Pang Kee's mind. The girl had pouted some silly thing about a wart on a nose, but she loved I Wing. Maidens so hurt had killed themselves!

Pang Kee wrung her hands, stumbled a little as she walked.

The pathless way was rough here: she had to pick her steps as best she could, between brambles and over stones.

Her head ached, her legs trembled, her heart bled for Pang Soo!

But, she suddenly interrupted herself; that was no reason to spoil her expensive new shoes! Where had she left her old ones? Back there behind a wayside shrine's prayer-stone.

She went back, sat down on the holy stone, found the shoes she had hidden behind it, and changed the footgear, hard tears blinding her as she did.

She carried her new shoes carefully, guarded her trousers and tunic as well as she could from the thorny brambles, and trudged on.

The horoscope! Gods, the costly horoscope! And she had paid for it! The horoscope was wasted.

Pang Kee moaned.

But she kept right on, spurred to quicken her pace that she might hurt Pang Soo the sooner, lest some stranger hurt her first and add to Pang Soo's grief the after-shame of having let her pitiful girl-secret escape her. She must get to Pang Soo as quickly as she could. Probably it was commonly known in the City that the rich apothecary's marriage was arranged, the wedding-day near.

But the cup! I Yeh said that the cup was valuable, would sell for great price, had promised to arrange it!

The woman's face half cleared. She was taking good news as well as bad to her lily-one. The price of the cup would not pay Pang Soo for the loss of the lover she desired; and Pang Kee knew how seldom Pang Soo ever changed her mind. But another bridegroom, as rich, as handsome—surely that must console Pang Soo! The price the cup fetched would enable See Chee, nimbled by an adequate fee, to find and to bind him.

The mother's heart sank, knowing that probably Pang Soo's bride-chair would carry her far! She never would see Pang Soo's courtyard! Never see Pang Soo again!

But she could picture the courtyard. She could think of Pang Soo. It would be enough. To know that her lily-one was sheltered, cherished, happy, would be her own happiness. She asked Kwan for no more.

But she writhed to think of that wasted horoscope!

And the other, the one she'd have to persuade the priest to make, she'd have to pay for with coins. And she foresaw that Woo Hsi, longing for pills she could not give him, would drive a hard bargain. Kwan grant that the cup was as valuable as I Yeh had said.

Hurrying on, thinking more intensely than it was easy for her to think, stumbling rather than walking, perilously near the edge of a deep, sheer ravine, a stone slipped under the woman's careless foot and a great brier snatched at her tunic; the stone threw her down, the thorny vine jerked

her down, and Pang Kee's face was cut and bleeding, torn by the jagged edge of broken jade.

She snatched for the cup as it slipped from her bosom—snatched too late. It splintered into a dozen bits, and they fell into the ravine, out of her reach; gone forever.

CHAPTER XXIII

FOR a long time Pang Kee sat where she'd fallen, sat and cried; a thwarted, heart-torn peasant woman to whom life never had been too kind, never soft or indulgent, but never before so brutal as to-day.

She cried until no more tears would come at despair's piteous call. And most such Chinese women have many and ready tears. But time to shed them was a luxury she always had lacked. Even her childhood had been toil-shackled.

Pang Kee took no heed of time, or of tasks neglected, now. She sat on the ground and wept until her scalding tears had wrung her eyes dry.

Then she got up and crawled on home, taking no care against what might catch, rip or soil her garments. She didn't care. Small things were small to her—for the first time in her life.

Pang Soo cried out when she saw her mother's face, ran to help her in, asking no question, thrusting the mother on to a stool, bringing her, as quickly as she could, scalding-hot water to drink.

But mother-love held. Pang Kee said what she must, before she drank. She did not tell of the cup of which Pang Soo never had known, or of the fortune lost in losing it. She would bear that alone, not lacerate Pang Soo with it. She told as considerately as she could, that I Wing was betrothed, that his marriage time was close.

Pang Soo laughed. Her laugh rang true.

Pang Kee thanked Kwan whom she had thought never to thank again.

The lily-one's desire had revolted from I Wing. Pang Soo had not pretended to desire him no more, had not feigned a revulsion she did not feel.

"Is it that that has hurt you? Only that?"

"That, only that."

"Forget him and our dreaming of him, mother-one. I would him not, if I could. The gods give me a more likeable man."

"The apothecary has great wealth."

"And a hideous wart on a crooked nose. There are other rich men straight-nosed and without ugly wart-lumps."

The girl sat down on the floor, and drew off Pang Kee's shoes and stockings, and began to chafe the woman's tired feet.

And Pang Kee was comforted: Pang Soo did not mind!

The gods who had lashed, had spared the worst that they might have dealt!

And Pang Kee took up life's grind again. After a few days she began again her desperate quest.

The loss of the jade cup scorched and cut—a constant pain, a constant sore. She must speak of it, she could not carry it in silence; she would not speak of it to Pang Soo.

She went to Woo Hsi the priest; went to him alone.

And the man was kind.

"Bring me the beautiful horoscopes when you have found another marriage, and I will alter them, and ask you no payment. I cannot find or repair your cup of jade. The gods themselves could not do that! But I will make the horoscopes fit. What you paid for them shall not be lost. When the bridegroom is found, and the marriage bargaining begins, I will do the priest-part all and you shall not pay."

The woman's face quivered.

"Have you meal at home? Have you a few coins?"

"I have both. A little. More I can earn."

"You are brave," the priest said approvingly. "The gods value courage. They will reward it—in time. They do not pay on the next market-day. They do not always pay at the New Year. But always they pay."

And again Pang Kee was comforted. She had come to the Caterpillar Temple that she might have the relief she so sorely needed; the relief of telling her trouble. She had found help and strength.

When she turned to go Woo Hsi bade her wait.

He left her alone.

When he came back he had a small box in his hands. He opened it, and counted slowly. But he knew well enough how many pills he had left.

Few more than a score!

One by one, slowly—as if it pained him—he counted four pills into his palm, and held them out to Pang Kee.

The woman hesitated.

"Quick!" he commanded roughly.

She still hesitated.

He thrust them into her hand.

"Be gone!" he croaked thickly, caught her shoulder, and thrust her out of the temple. The bar of the temple door clashed behind her.

Pang Kee hurried home—more surprised than she ever had been before. Zut Qu had surprised her. I Yeh had surprised her with the value of Zut Qu's cup. The priest of the Caterpillar-god had surprised her most of all. And to-day Pang Kee would have shared her only grain of rice with Woo Hsi if she had had but one grain of rice! Or believed that she would.

Much of another year passed.

No word came from Shu A-fah.

Pang Soo sang at her work.

Pang Kee stood steady. She took up her plan where it

had snapped off—and went on, unconquered. She worked no harder than she had, she ate no less than she had, lived for Pang Soo no more or more unselfishly than she had. None of that was possible. But she kept right on, and as she had.

Closer and closer the peasant mother and daughter grew day by day, moon after moon. And Pang Soo grew and softened in understanding of Pang Kee.

When at last Pang Kee timorously told Pang Soo, "Your marriage is arranged," Pang Soo heard it placidly, accepted it cheerfully.

It was not such a marriage as Pang Kee had wished, and once had dreamed. But it was the best she had been able to induce the surly *mei-jên* to bring about. The matchmaker was disgruntled at the loss of the possible I connection. And bridegrooms were scarce; scarce indeed for dowerless wives, no matter how fair of face.

It was not the superlatively auspicious marriage that Pang Kee longed for her lily-one. But she strained her hardest to have it appear so.

It *was* marriage—marriage, the one goal of Chinese girlhood; marriage, the door to motherhood.

Nothing better seemed procurable. And Shu A-fah might return any hour if he still lived. He might return as poor as he had gone. That he was so long in coming back to them, Pang Kee believed told that he had not prospered except just at first. Why should he? It did not occur to Pang Kee that Shu A-fah, if he lived, might never come back, had forgotten, had ceased to care.

Pang Soo had all but forgotten Shu A-fah. She had thought him faithful but dull, one who served well, but neither amused nor interested. She rarely thought of him, never with regret.

Pang Kee accepted the only marriage that See Chee offered, or seemed likely ever to offer.

And Pang Soo made no protest, appeared content.

CHAPTER XXIV

PANG KEE, triumphant, heart-broken, stood on the hut's black threshold-stone, shading her straining eyes with her toil-roughened hand; straining her eyes to see as long as she could the bride-chair in which they were carrying Pang Soo to an unknown husband's *chia*.

It was a mean bride-chair in a mean procession. A few moons ago I Wing's bride had been brought to him, locked in a glittering "flowery" of crimson and gold, her richly clad procession more than a *li* in length. Her bridesmaids had followed her in chairs half as splendid as her own. All the poor of the quarter had feasted on the crumbs of the great marriage feast. One old woman, peasant and plain-clad, went with Pang Soo, since Pang Soo must eat and sleep on her long journey: a surly attendant whose sole wedding adornment was a cape of red paper. The red robe that Pang Soo wore was not hers; it was but hired. Many peasant brides had worn it before, many peasant brides would wear it again.

Even the cheap "flowery" and the faded red robe could not have been hired by Pang Kee but for the generosity of Woo Hsi. The *mei-jên* had taken Pang Kee's last coin.

To all who would listen Pang Kee boasted of the rich bridegroom to whom Pang Soo was going, boasted of the jewels he had sent, boasted of the sumptuous apartments and the superior courtyard in which his young number-one would rule. His mother had gone On High, Pang Kee said; Pang Soo would be supreme and unmolested. She hoped that she was believed.

That the man was rich, she did not doubt, since he could afford a small-footed. She had no doubt that he would dote on Pang Soo; but she knew that Pang Soo would not have a first wife's place. And she knew—all China knows—how sore a secondary's lot might prove. But he desired

a son; his number-one, whom he would not divorce, had borne him none. She might chide and thwart Pang Soo at first, even the go-between admitted it, but the birth of a son would delight the woman as well as the man, and would make all well for Pang Soo. Pang Soo would bear a son—three sons. The fortune-tellers had foretold it. And the husband, even at first, would not require her to labor, since he could afford a small-footed lily-one.

It was the best they could do, and Pang Kee had consented with tears. Pang Soo had consented indifferently. The man was rich. That was all that mattered to Pang Soo. She would win him, grapple his desire to her, chain his will to hers; she had no doubt that she could. Nor had Pang Kee. She would win his number-one. Pang Kee was not so sure.

Pang Kee had not deceived Pang Soo. She hoped that she had deceived every one else that knew them.

The poor little cortège passed on, out of sight.

It was over.

She should not see Pang Soo again.

Pang Kee took up a spade, and began to dig.

There was nothing now in the hiding-place. The salt-lump was small. The meal-crock was almost empty.

The woman went to her vegetable patch, and dug until it was dark.

Pang Soo, though the heat of the day was grueling, and the locked chair stifling, shivered. But her pretty painted mouth was clinched hard. She cared little where she was going, or what she'd find there. She gave no thought to the person or to the personality of the stranger to whom they were carrying her, the man who would lift her from the hired bride-chair, wedding her so, for secondaries are married from the chair—no marriage-rites for them. She shrank and was chill because she had left her mother; trembled a little with fear of the unknown. Whether she liked or disliked her husband was nothing to her—she thought.

She was determined to please him and to please his powerful first-wife, not for her own sake, not to win favor and ease for herself. She was determined to serve and to please them that she might earn from them the reward of a measure of rice and its despatch to her mother.

Pang Soo's heart was bleeding for her mother—alone in their hut; only the door-cat for fellowship; no fuel or food for which she did not toil; fetching, carrying, carting, digging, weeding, hoeing, all day every day—alone. Alone in the blistering days. Alone in the candleless nights. Alone in the cold.

Pang Soo wondered how long the cat would live. It was old. It could not be overfed.

Midway from her old home to her new they halted and ate. They slept: the coolie men on the ground, the chair-cramped women as best they could. The crone slept well.

Several days after that—for they carried her far, and went slowly—at dawn Pang Soo and her "maid" changed chairs. The "flowery" had to go back now. Pang Kee had not been able to pay for it to go all the way. But it didn't matter. It had served its purpose. The neighbors had seen Pang Soo veiled and clad in a bride's red, lifted into it, locked in it, and borne away to her eager waiting lord.

The old woman took back with her the cheap red robe and the flimsy red veil. They, too, were hired for but part of the journey.

"Kwan be with you!" the crone said.

Pang Soo answered cheerfully, and watched with a glowing, smiling face the other go—that the woman should report her happy to Pang Kee.

There was less room in the chair she sat in now, but more air. She could draw back the thin curtains, and see what they passed.

Two coolies lifted her chair, and plodded on.

Pang Soo sat stoically still.

At sunset they put the chair down, and knocked at a

gate—the poor enough gate of a seemingly poor enough place. Apparently there was no gatekeeper. They had to wait a long time before Pang Soo heard heavy, shuffling footsteps.

The gate was unbarred from within. One door of the gate was pushed out. A man came to the side of the chair, lifted the girl out, scarcely looking at her, and carried her through the half-open gate. He rebolted it, still holding Pang Soo in one arm, and then he shuffled heavily on to the house that lay gray between a field of turnips and a wide onion-bed.

Pang Soo was married.

Shu A-fah was going back to Pang Kee's hut. He was not far from it now. He reached it the next day—the day after Pang Soo's husband carried her in for the inspection of his first-wife.

CHAPTER XXV

THE old cat, that he had given to Pang Soo when it was a kitten, saw him before Pang Kee did. It was not chained; let loose that it might forage for field mice. It ran to Shu A-fah more quickly than it often ran now. He bent down and picked it up, and it fondled his face with its rough tongue. And when Shu A-fah, with Chinese dislike of being touched, thrust it down into the crook of his arm, it began to purr so loud that Pang Kee heard it and looked up, and saw that Shu A-fah had come at last.

The woman was as glad to see Shu A-fah as the cat had been. But she showed it less. She went on digging; nodded "well come" pleasantly but unsmiling, and kept on digging.

Shu A-fah went to her quickly and took the spade from her, and at once went on with her work; digging as carefully as she had, and more vigorously.

"It is better for me than for you, venerable mother-one."

"There is work here for us both, my son."

"Rest you!" he commanded. "I will do twice work."

Pang Kee squatted down. Truly she was very tired.

"Let us eat," Shu A-fah suggested when it grew too dark to dig satisfactorily.

The woman sighed. "Little is in the food-place."

That often was so. Shu A-fah had come prepared.

"Some food I have brought," he said. "Rest you still. I will prepare our meal."

He put away the spade, and went into the hut, looking about him hungrily.

Pang Soo was not there.

He quickened the *k'ang*, and mixed oat-gruel, took three sweet potatoes from his loin-cloth and thrust them in the ashes to roast, spread out the lychees and peanuts he had brought, got the three tea-bowls; a meager meal, but they often had eaten less and thought it feasting.

Then he waited for the kettle to boil up, the potatoes to cook, his eyes hungry on the door through which they must come—Pang Kee and Pang Soo.

Presently Pang Kee hobbled in.

Shu A-fah did not question her. She told him nothing. But her eyes clung to him, as to something she needed and trusted. And they sat together and waited until the potatoes and kettle were ready.

Shu A-fah got up and filled two of the broth-bowls.

Pang Kee ate and drank eagerly. He ate little—always his eyes on the door. It was growing late. The low room was growing darker and darker.

But he would not question Pang Kee until she had finished. But he was growing anxious. Sometimes Pang Kee sent Pang Soo on errands, but never far—the girl's golden-lilies were not for long walking—and never on an errand that kept her into the darkness.

A third of the gruel, a basin beside it, kept warm on the

stove. A third of the persimmons and peanuts still lay on the table.

When she had eaten her share Pang Kee went to the *k'ang* and got the pan of gruel. But when she began to pour it into his basin Shu A-fah stayed her.

"It is the lily-one's," he reminded.

Pang Kee divided the gruel between them with scrupulous fairness before she spoke.

"Li Soo eats in her husband's *chia*," she said, lifting her bowl to her mouth.

Shu A-fah thrust his bowl away. Pang Kee could not see the look on his face, the dark was thickening about them now. But she felt his dismay. The room felt colder.

"Gone!"

"She will not return."

Shu A-fah ate no more.

He did not question Pang Kee again to-night. Stricken, he was silent. And soon he went from the hut without a word.

At dawn he returned. And when they had breakfasted on scalding water and a morsel of salted cabbage, he questioned the woman again. His lips stiffened with the pain of the words they spoke.

"Yes," Pang Kee told him, "she was glad to go. 'The bridegroom?' An eminent rich-one. Strong. Handsome. Educated. The betrothal gifts he had sent were rare and costly; score upon scores of them." Pang Kee enumerated them somewhat haltingly.

"His honorable parents are dead," she hurried on. "Pang Soo is a number-one. She sleeps on a nuptial-bed of ivory hung with crimson brocade. The bride-crown he sent was heavy with jewels. I did not know that such gems were. He sent her two hundred pairs of shoes, twenty tinseled scarfs. Three coolies carried her face-paints he sent. Even the coolies were clad in silk that rustled like bamboo in a summer wind. None could count the bride-cakes. The flutes played as she went. Twenty song-birds, caged in

gilded and silvered wire, sang to her as she journeyed. All her lifetime will be joy and plenty. And I am alone."

Shu A-fah covered his twitching face with his sleeve.

"I am alone," Pang Kee repeated.

Shu A-fah did not hear her.

"You will stay with me, Shu A-fah?"

He did not hear her.

Pang Kee left him then. She went to the melon-patch, and knelt down and thinned many leaves from the vines, that the fruits should thrive the better, saving the leaves for broth and fuel.

A long hour passed before Shu A-fah came to her as she knelt plucking away the coarser leaves.

He did not offer to do her work, or to share it.

The spot was lacerating with memories; the melon garden that he had made and planted and tended for little Pang Soo. Every leaf on every vine stabbed him.

It was a long time before he spoke.

Pang Kee did not look up.

"When was the lily-one wed?" he asked at last. He asked it sharply.

"She lay on her nuptial-quilts last night," Pang Kee said without raising her head.

Last night! As he had come back to the threshold of the hut, bringing his poor gifts of meal and fruit and a thin wallet of coins, her bridegroom had lifted Pang Soo from her flowery-chair, and carried her in, over the nuptial-fire, carried her to her chamber, put her down gently, lifted away her crimson veil, feasted his eyes on her lovely face as she stood shy beside the ivory bed, accepted his bride, looked at her tiny golden-lilies with burning eyes, and—

Shu A-fah could not speak.

When he contrived to speak his voice was thick, his words were cold.

Again he questioned.

But Pang Kee would answer no more. She already had let slip that the bridegroom's surname was Li—the com-

monest name in China. His other names, or in which province his home, she would not tell. It was nothing to Shu A-fah!

"How do you know that he will deal kindly by her?"

"She is very fair. Her lilies are very small. She charms."

Yes; that was true. It was not unlikely that she would rule in her lord's rich *chia* as she had ruled here in the hut home; rule Li the accursed as she had ruled her mother and him, Shu A-fah.

But there was always a chance that a wife would find neither kindness nor happiness. Was this man all that Pang Kee said?

How did it fare with Pang Soo?

He—he, Shu A-fah, would learn.

He might never again see Pang Soo. But he would see the man Li. He swore it, standing there in Pang Soo's melon-patch. And if all were not well with her, he would see her again!

Why did he grudge her the wealth her mother reported, grudge her the far-away home of luxury? Shu A-fah knew.

Pang Kee rose with her arms and sleeves full of leaves. She went close to Shu A-fah.

"I am alone, Shu A-fah," she said pleadingly.

Shu A-fah made no reply.

"I am old. I grow feeble. You will stay with me?"

"I have a journey to take. I may come again—after. I cannot tell."

"Stay with me," the woman whimpered.

He answered her kindly. "That I cannot now. I may come again."

"Go not," she cried. "Without you my life will be desolate. Without your aid I shall hunger. I no longer can trudge and earn as I did. My white hairs command you! Without a son my grave will be desolate and shamed. I would adopt you, Shu A-fah!"

Shu A-fah blazed out then. Forgetting her years, forgetting the years of kindness that had been between them, he refused her sharply. He upbraided her.

The woman retorted coarsely. She cursed him shrilly.

Shu A-fah's lip curled. He did not speak to her again. He thrust his wallet into her shaking hand, and turned away, going quickly.

Pang Kee screamed and ran after him, scattering the melon leaves, letting the purse fall. But she ran in vain; she could not catch up with Shu A-fah.

He strode on rapidly, and he did not look back.

"Shu A-fah! My son! My son!" she shrieked.

He was out of sight.

Her legs were failing her. The chase was hopeless.

She flung a last curse into the heedless air, and limped back to the melon-patch.

She found the wallet, and counted its coins. There was silver among them! She need not hunger soon.

She crawled about painfully, gathering up again the leaves she had scattered, sobbing weakly as she did so.

The *k'ang* was cold when she went into the hut.

Pang Kee was alone.

CHAPTER XXVI

SHU A-FAH wrung the truth from See Chee the *mei-jên,* as far as she knew it.

A farmer in Shensi had commissioned her to get him a secondary wife, a sturdy Shantung peasant girl, able to work, apt to bear a son. He had stipulated nothing about her face or her disposition. He had stipulated her age, and insisted on perfect health. He had asked for nothing with her, not a robe, not a quilt. He was rich, the *mei-jên* insisted, but mean. He had driven a sharp bargain with her. No, she had not seen him. A trading merchant had done his business with her. He lived near Jade Happiness City.

His full name was Li Ho. The girl had gone willingly. The match was a good one, for her; promised more plenty, more certain food, better robes than the hut-born daughter of penniless Pang Kee could have expected. It was social advancement for the daughter of old Pang Kee. Fortunately, Li had not questioned of the girl's feet. They might enrage him; they were not the best feet for a secondary who must toil. On the other hand, they might win her his favor. They were very beautiful feet.

Shu A-fah gnawed his lip, till teeth drew blood.

He cursed the *mei-jên*. His soul cursed Pang Kee.

The delicate lily-one wedded to toil and misery! Forced to earn her savorless rice with sweating, aching flesh! Pang Soo a secondary! Disregarded, misused! Shu A-fah's gorge rose.

That he regarded her new lot so was unreasonable. A secondary wife's place is honorable. Often her days are happy, her sleep comfortable. China respects her. Her children are legitimate. Penniless Pang Kee and the *mei-jên* had not done ill for Pang Soo—as peasant wedlock goes in Shantung. Shu A-fah was unreasonable. Infatuation usually is—and love.

At once Shu A-fah began to walk and work his way to Shensi.

It had cost him a moon of heavy toil to earn the silver without which he had known it was useless to go to the *mei-jên*. It would take him moons to walk to Shensi.

Shu A-fah was terribly lonely.

Pang Kee, with only the cat for fellowship, was terribly lonely.

Li Soo was loneliest of the three.

It had taken the chairmen days of conscientious trotting to carry Pang Soo to her husband. It took Shu A-fah three times as many moons to reach the farm of Li Ho. The chairmen knew the way, and were provisioned with food and a few strings of *cash*. Shu A-fah, except for a

general direction, had to grope his way; he often blundered, taking long needless loops; several times he turned to the right when he should have turned to the left. It cost many wasted days; retracing his way cost as many more. He had to earn as he went, delaying to do any work he was paid to do, twice striking off with his employers in retarding directions. Once he fell ill; it delayed him some months, fretted him the more because he never had been ill before, and when he was able to go on again, he had to go slowly on insecure legs, and ill-fed because in his weakness few would employ him, and from the few who did he earned little. But he went on.

He attempted desperately to join for a time a train of bandits he met on their stealthy march. They laughed at him, and bade him be gone. But they gave him a hearty meal, a short lift on a sturdy stolen mule, and careful accurate advice concerning his next day's route.

It took Shu A-fah more than ten moons to reach the *chia* of Li Ho.

In ten moons much had happened to Li Soo. A determining chapter of her life had been begun and ended.

Li Ho was disappointed in his new marriage bargain.

Li Soo was appalled by hers.

The man was angry; the girl was desperate.

When he lifted her out of her chair, accepting and wedding her so, Li the farmer slung her across his shoulder as indifferently as if she'd been a sack of meal, and carried her, with as little ceremony as he'd have carried the meal, to her bridal home.

He made no haste, showed no eagerness.

He did not speak to her once.

He halted more than once to attend to some farm detail; once to scold and direct a farm-hand standing on the primitive "drag" of a crude plow to which a cow and a donkey were impartially hitched; once to kick back a clod that had fallen from a dung-heap; once—the longest halt

he made—to stand and admire the delicate sunset that painted the sky and orchard trees with tender beauty. Callous to the living girl across his shoulder, his eyes were loving on the soft rose and green clouds and on the sunset-tinted-and-burnished trees.

Li Keen, the number-one, was busy in her kitchen when Li put the bride down between them for their joint inspection.

They stood with their hands on their hips, and gazed at her critically. Li Soo hid her hands in her sleeves and smiled at Li Keen and waited.

The husband and wife looked at each other in sour dismay.

The woman spoke first.

"Yama curse her! All the Hell-gods take her! Look at her feet!" she screamed.

Li Ho looked. In spite of himself his heart softened a little. He never before had seen such beautiful feet! And they were his; he had bought them when he lifted the girl out of the chair. Other men would envy him his secondary's feet when their wives reported them.

Somewhat appeased by the feet that had cost Pang Kee so much in money and in self-denial, and that would give him increase of "face," Li Ho shifted his eyes up to Li Soo's face, and considered her figure. He scowled at both. This was a doll, a frail, useless girl. He had ordered a sturdy farm-hand, the *mei-jên* had defrauded him, palmed off on him a no-use courtyard idler.

The tiny feet were both detriment and asset. A small-footed *could* work, if not to best advantage. This small-footed *should*. But what work could that slim willowy body perform? Every line of her was soft! Her face was dimpled like a baby's; an impudent, saucy face, into the bargain, for all its downcast eyes and demure pose.

Li Keen would mend that. But Li Keen could not give sinews and strength where there were none. Hard work would coarsen that delicate skin, no doubt; would it

toughen and make serviceable such tender flesh, turn muscles of soft silk into muscles of steel?

But, he reflected, maternity was not so exacting as farm work was. The girl looked healthy enough—as far as she went; possibly she could bear him a son. She might bear him many sons. Much would be forgiven her for that—even something pardoned the nefarious *mei-jên*.

He looked at his wife, Li Keen.

"She will serve to wash vegetables and dust the House-god," he said.

"She will serve for me to beat," Li Keen hissed.

Li Soo giggled ingratiatingly. She had not understood a word of theirs. Their tongue was not her tongue. But she could but know that they spoke disapprovingly of her. That their husband's number-one did, did not greatly surprise her. Her feminine instinct accepted it as the natural expression of a perfectly natural feeling. But, the little she had anticipated at all, she had anticipated a pleasanter beginning with her bridegroom.

She giggled again, softly; an invitation to more friendliness. The giggling was ill-advised. It did not attract the man. It infuriated Li Keen. And her rage both frightened and infected Li Ho. For twenty years he had lived under his wife's heavy thumb. Never too sunny, her ill-humor increased by dislike of their secondary boded him ill; increase of discomfort already sufficient.

"Be you silent, slut-one!"

Li Soo did not understand what Li Keen said. But she understood it rebuke and animosity. She did not giggle again. She stood stock-still and waited, her face as expressionless as the clay House-god's.

Secretly Li Soo, little as she approved either her bridegroom or the superior wife, thought well of her new home. This kitchen seemed a place of luxury to her. It was not small. There were rugs of wool on the board floor, for Li Keen suffered from chilblains.

What was cooking smelt deliciously savory. Food that

she had looked at longingly in the Shantung city, but never had tasted, lay on a shelf and was stacked in broad baskets. The kitchen utensils shone. To her unaccustomed eyes they seemed richly abundant. The whole and flower-painted crockery looked to her masterpieces of art, and they evidently were in daily use. Li Keen's trousers were banded with embroidery, her jade ear-rings had tassels of seed-pearls. The House-god, throned above the stove, wore robes of brilliant silk; his women, on either side of him, were clad as gorgeously. His wife had a jeweled hairpin, his concubine wore a velvet rose in her tinseled coat.

The porcelain stove was several times larger than Pang Kee's *k'ang,* and it glowed with a fire on which the fuel had not been scanted. A rosy azalea bloomed in a blue pot on the window-ledge; beyond the open window the ripening vegetables and the grains beyond them seemed endless. A ham hung from a rafter.

The *mei-jên* had said truly that the honorable bridegroom was wealthy. Li Soo reserved her ultimate verdict; but on the whole it was favorable.

She was tepidly inclined to approve her husband. His sturdy build appealed to her more than Shu A-fah's stripling slenderness ever had; if she had not been particularly comfortable on his shoulder, she had felt secure there, and she liked his wartless nose. As for the woman, whose ear-rings she envied, and whose embroidered trousers she coveted, she had not expected to be loved as Pang Kee loved her.

She determined to win them both.

In the weeks that followed, Li Soo did not miss a husband's caresses, for she had had no preconception of a man's expressed tenderness. She had had no idea of what marriage would be like, and so felt the less disappointment—at first.

They gave her drudgery, but they gave her all she could eat of better and more varied food than she ever had had

in Shantung. They gave her rough tasks, but they were lighter than Pang Kee's had been—shorter work hours, less heavy burdens. She knew that a secondary wife had to serve and obey the first-wife. But she knew that if she bore a son it would advance her to almost equality with Li Keen. If the old first-wife died Li Ho might make her his number-one, and get another secondary to serve and obey her.

That they disliked her, scarcely impressed her at first, because Li Soo was so invulnerably self-centered. And holy Woo Hsi had warned her that neither husband nor first-wife would indulge her as Pang Kee had.

Often Shu A-fah's almost servile devotion had bored her more than it had won her. Li Ho easily could have won more liking from his inexperienced number-two than she ever had felt for devoted Shu A-fah. But Li neglected the opportunity. He severely left her to Li Keen. He did not speak to her twenty times in three months. He rarely looked at her, though occasionally his eyes went to her tiny feet. Sometimes he came to her abruptly, but he never once lingered.

Li Keen was actively cruel to her. Yet she guarded her, struck her now and then, but even in her rage was scrupulously careful not to injure her.

Not long after she came to Li's *chia,* Li Soo knew that the number-one watched her anxiously, and suddenly treated her with solicitous kindness.

Li Soo was glad, but not grateful.

She was not of the caliber that forgets or forgives.

The indifference and self-confidence of her first weeks had turned into misery that was almost despair. She brooded, did her uncongenial tasks surlily, no longer tried to propitiate either Li or his wife. When not too weary to think, she thought and thought of how she could be revenged. Escape she would have paid any price for—living escape. But she could see no way of escape.

Suicide never once occurred to her. That would have

punished indeed the man and woman she hated. Her self-made corpse on their doorstep would have disgraced and punished them as nothing else could. But Li Soo wished to live. Her life was miserable, but she clung to it. Almost they had broken her spirit; but there was granite in her peasant blood, the granite of character that had enabled dull Pang Kee to do and to endure what many a mother of genius, greater of wit, smaller of will, could not have compassed. Li Soo meant to go on; to wait and watch.

One radiant day when she was carding yarn, sitting on her stool beside the tree of lemon-colored roses—the spot here she most liked, Li sought her out, and gave her a ring. She was delighted to have it, but she felt no less hatred of him.

Li Keen gave her a new dress, embroidered trousers, and tunic, all complete. Li Soo was overjoyed, but she felt no kindness towards Li Keen.

The man added new shoes to the ring. The woman added a fan. It was an elegant fan. Li Keen bade her put by the task she was bending over, bade her go and rest where she liked. The Shantung girl understood many words of the Shensi dialect now, and it was easy to understand the older woman's gesture and tone. Li Soo went quickly and squatted down beside the lemon-colored rose.

And something like happiness came back to her there, as she filled her soul with fragrance and beauty of the yellow roses, partook reverently of the beauty which is one of the indispensable ingredients of the spiritual rice which has made and kept the Chinese—from prince to peasant—great and fine.

She loved the sunlight. She loved the sky's quivering blue. She loved the rose and blue lilies moving now and then in the soft breeze. She loved the baby squirrel that scolded at her from an old walnut tree. Most of all here, she loved the fragrant lemon roses.

And while these ministered to her she felt no human

lack, felt little need of human companionship or kindness, still less felt need of human love.

But Li Soo had made a friend here in Shensi, gained a friendship firmer and more powerful than she suspected.

And only she herself and old San Bin the cat-cutter knew that she had.

The scarecrows of China deserve an epic.

In nothing else is Chinese ingenuity more surprising than in the contriving and making of scarecrows. Only lion-hearted birds venture near a first-class scarecrow.

San Bin was an expert. And, as so many Chinese artisans do, he specialized.

He made cats—only cats—life-like and demonic.

It sometimes is said that Chinese cats are tail-less. Many are, many are not. The tail-less cats of Siam have the honor of Chinese descent.

San Bin's cats were well-tailed. No Chinese cats have more than one tail apiece. Some of San Bin's scarecrow cats had several tails each—fearsome tails.

They were flat cats, cut from smooth, thin slabs of wood. They were elegantly and noticeably painted; grotesquely furred by San Bin's inspired brush.

They had splendid eyes, luminous red eyes, that darted here and there as the cats, carefully pivoted by San Bin, swung threateningly in every hint of wind.

Their tongues were as red and threatening as their angry, glittering eyes were—long, curling, snarling tongues.

Every farmer in this part of the Province, who could afford to, bought cat-scarecrows from San Bin.

Li Ho bought many. And always San Bin himself placed and balanced them. No one else could do it half so well.

Li Soo, free of all the *chia* now, often watched for San Bin's coming. She liked to see him at his work. She liked his terrific cats.

No one noticed how often the secondary and the old artisan were together. No one would have cared. Li Soo

did as she liked, much of the time now. And San Bin, high in Li Ho's favor, too was free of all the *chia*.

From watching the cat-cutter at his work, Li Soo came to speak with him, and he to her.

Comradeship grew between them.

She told him of her cat at home in Shantung—she told him of many things.

Often he brought her a simple gift. She reminded him of a woman who had died long ago.

San Bin learned much about Li Soo. She learned that he was kind.

Except that he cut cats, and that she liked him, she learned nothing else of courteous old San Bin—not even where he lived.

It was an odd companionableness that they had in their occasional hours together: welcomed by the cat-cutter because of a girl who had gone On High, sweet to lonely Li Soo because she had no other.

And it was a mustard seed.

CHAPTER XXVII

THEN came miracle! That was what it seemed to Li Soo. A miracle of constant occurrence in China.

One day late in the rainy Lotus-moon, a day she'd long remember as the bitterest yet in her husband's *chia*, Li Keen struck her twice, reviled her without ceasing, gave her the tasks she most disliked, indescribable tasks that sickened her, cursed and thrashed her for not doing them more quickly and with a smiling face.

The next day as she and the number-one sat at their rice, Li Ho came in from the cotton-field, and flung himself down on the long bench. He looked weary and out of humor. Li Soo quietly continued eating. Li Keen put down her chop-sticks, and turned to their husband excitedly, spoke to him so rapidly that Li Soo, not at all sure

of the Shensi dialect yet, did not understand what the woman said.

Li Ho sat up with a grunt of delight. Whatever his wife had said had pleased him greatly. He and she beamed at each other.

"Are sure?" he demanded.

"Sure!" Li Keen replied.

The man laughed happily. He looked at Li Soo kindly.

Until night Li Keen did not find fault with the secondary. A few days after that, again when his wives were eating their rice, Li came into the kitchen. He went to Li Soo and caught her chop-sticks away.

The girl smothered a sigh. She was hungry. The stew was delicious. She scarcely had begun to eat. What had she done now to enrage the beast of a man? What other punishment was he going to give her? She shrank away from him a little.

Li flung the old rough chop-sticks across the room, and drew from his loin-cloth a pair of very beautiful chop-sticks. Li Soo never had seen such chop-sticks. They were ivory, beautifully carved.

"For you, little persimmon!" He thrust them into the girl's hands, and motioned her to use them.

Li Soo gave him a startled look. Li Ho was smiling at her, and his eyes were friendly. She threw a frightened glance at Li Keen. The first-wife was pleased and approving! She looked back at Li Soo as kindly as the man had.

Li Soo was amazed and baffled. She went on eating stoically until she had scraped the last atom from her eat-bowl, and sucked the last touch of food from the new chop-sticks. She enjoyed the stew, she was delighted with the beautiful ivory chop-sticks; but she was suspicious of the gift. What was back of it, and of Li Keen's complacency at it.

From being the drudge of the house, she had become its idol. Li treated her kindly, Li Keen lavished indulgence on her. It was hard to believe that the affection and

approval with which the woman looked at her and spoke to her were assumed.

Quick-witted Li Soo could not understand it. She was glad of the change, but she mistrusted it. She hated Li and his other wife as much as she had. They might be the change-coats they seemed. But she was no change-coat!

Perhaps Kwan, on her behalf, had cast a spell on them?

If so, she was grateful to Kwan Yin. But she felt no gratitude to Li or to Li Keen. She gave them contempt and enmity. She never would give them else.

A moon passed.

The child leapt.

And then Li Soo understood.

Sex-instinct told her what neither Pang Kee nor Li Keen had ever explained to her.

She made the most of her pregnancy; took favors and immunities for granted, because of it, ignored tasks that she easily could have performed, pretended a lassitude she did not suffer. Women have done that all over the world since the days of Eve.

She knew Li's chief reason for marrying her; knew what was most wanted and hoped from her. Almost from babyhood every Chinese girl knows that. She knew why, disappointed as they had been in her, and much as they had disliked her, they had kept her, had failed to banish or divorce her, had kept her body nourished and undeformed. She knew the incalculable advantage a son would be to her. She hoped her child would be a boy. She knew what cause she had to dread the birth of a daughter.

In the meantime she made the most of her situation, squeezed every ounce of selfish enjoyment out of it that she and her ingenuity could. If the black time came again, it came! It might not come. Until it did she would give it no thought. She basked in her opulent present.

She demanded wine. They gave it. She asked for stickpins. She got them, finer ones than Li Keen's. She tore

her best trousers. Li Keen mended them neatly, and Li Ho bought her another pair. "A song-bird!" Li went to the City for it. He brought it back in a gilded cage. When the women sat at rice she never once had a chance to demand the choicest morsels; Li Keen gave them before the mothering girl could ask for them.

If she bore Li a son!

She'd take every advantage she could of that. She'd coax coins from Li. Even now she contrived to steal a small one now and then. And once when they caught her red-handed they both laughed, and Li gave her another *cash.*

If the child were a boy, she'd coax little by little coins that would buy a crate of rice, white rice, and the wage of a carry-coolie who should take it to Pang Kee.

In her own young motherhood she constantly thought of her mother, thought of her tenderly, longed for her desperately.

She never once thought of Shu A-fah, her playmate and server, Shu A-fah who was crossing two provinces painfully on sore lamed feet, toiling and half starving himself to find her.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LI was kind to Li Soo now. Li Keen was many times kinder. Li Keen was mother-good to pregnant Li Soo. And the affection the woman showed to the mothering girl was not assumed. Li Keen loved Li Soo as if the secondary had been her own daughter.

They denied her nothing, the girl who was about to bear them a child.

Li Keen watched over her, and tended her.

The persimmons were ripe.

Another moon, and the autumn grains were harvested.

The year's last moon came: the Bitter-moon, which in Shantung they had called the Pepper-moon, sometimes

called the Poppy-moon. On the moon's eighth day *La pa ch'ou* came with its feasting on the thick porridge of whole grains, nuts, beans, four kinds of sugar—there must be four—made thicker with many other things, but never any sort of flour or meal: *la pa erh,* a sacred national dish almost as old as China.

Preparations for New Year were brisk in Li Keen's busy kitchen. Every woman there was working: chopping meat, mixing dough, shredding candied fruit.

Even Li Soo on her cushioned stool out in the garden was counting candied almond flowers and rose petals into a lacquer basket, humming contentedly as she worked.

Li Keen looked through the kitchen window, and turned back and went on grinding with a grunt of satisfaction because the girl-mother of her son looked so well and strong. And Li Keen was greatly content to have seen that Li Soo was pilfering and eating many of the sugared flowers. The mother beneath whose girdle a son lives has inordinate craving for sugar. Li Keen smiled, and spoke kindly to a slave-girl to whom always she was harsh.

Li Soo moaned—the half-cry of a frightened child.

Li Keen sprang up, cuffed Eh Pegg out of her way, and rushed into the garden, and caught up the girl in her arms and carried her into the house, carried her to the number-one's own chamber.

The great red room until now had been sacrosanct to Li Keen. Only Li Ho ever dared cross its threshold unless bidden by her. Li Soo never had seen it before.

Nor did she see it now; blinded by pain and fear, she took no notice of the great crimson-hung crimson bed with its heaped crimson, embroidered satin quilts, its ventilated, painted wooden pillows. She did not see the costly drawer-chests, the silver-framed steel mirror, the soft silk carpet, the luck-picture on the wall. She took no notice of the grinning god that squatted on Li Keen's treasure-chest.

Li Soo was blind. She was trembling violently. The girl screamed.

Li Keen laid her down gently on the splendid crimson quilts, and struck the bedside gong sharply.

Li Soo did not hear it. But the other women did, and rushed to obey it.

The almost-child's labor was hard; even worse, it was long. For twenty-eight hours she suffered and fought, terrified and in absolute torture. The girl's body was incredibly delicate for the child of sturdy peasant stock; and her binded feet had done nothing to toughen it, nor had Pang Kee's indulgence. Li Keen had often seen birth, never such birth as this. She suffered for the girl.

There were no narcotics here. The woman sent for poppy.

Li Ho refused to let the messenger bring it.

The number-one cursed the woman who brought his refusal, and hurried to him herself.

But for once Li Ho overruled her; stood firm.

"It might injure the child," he said. "Let her suffer. When our son is safely delivered give her what you will. No harm must come to the child. It cannot be long now."

But it was many grueling hours.

Cry after cry rang through the day, cries weaker and more pitiful sobbed through the night.

The house was distraught.

But Li Keen kept her nerve. She did not leave Li Soo again; gave her such help as she could, tended her with inexhaustible patience and infinite tenderness. The serving-women scarcely knew Li Keen.

The promises she murmured would have tempted a queen. But there is no bribing childbirth pain.

Twice the suffering girl fainted. And the woman was glad of the girl's respite, although she half feared that Li Soo was dead, and the child with its mother.

But Li Soo shivered convulsively back to consciousness and pain. And the women crowding the room wailed with the wailing girl—all but Li Keen. She laid pitying hands on Li Soo, and spoke to her tenderly.

Li Ho creeping in now and then, his deep bronze, sunburnt skin went the peculiar blue-yellow which is the Chinese pallor of intense emotion and of flesh that is cold. Li Keen ordered him away curtly, and he went, to come again.

At the hour-of-the-monkey the child was born.

Li Keen snatched it up tenderly, instantly dashed it down roughly, and struck the girl, all torn and sore from her ordeal, full in the face, struck her twice on her swelling young breasts. And Li Soo knew that she had not borne them a son.

Li Keen reviled them both. "May your milk poison it," was the kindest thing she said.

The babe wailed. Li Keen had wrenched its spine.

Li Soo, too spent to move, gathered it close on her breast. She was not angry with her baby. And her eyes were fierce on quivering, rage-maddened Li Keen.

The demented woman bent over them, cursed them hideously, and spat on the child.

The women slunk from the room, fearful that their crazed mistress might harm them.

"You shall perish together! The jackals shall eat you!" the number-one promised.

Li Soo's eyes blazed on Li Keen.

And Li Ho, coming in again, understood.

"Only a girl," he muttered.

Li Keen sobbed.

"Let us destroy them both!" the number-one exclaimed.

"Do what you will with the child," Li told her indifferently. "Preserve the mother," he added firmly. "She is a child-bearer. She may yet bear many sons. Chu Poo's wife bore two daughters before she bore six sons."

Li Keen snarled a word that Li Soo did not understand. Li Ho answered her back as roughly, and they left the room together wrangling fiercely.

And Li Soo and her whimpering baby were left alone.

Li Soo caressed it with trembling fingers, and Li Soo's

heart was sore and hungry for her mother. Presently she wept, careful to do it without a sound, lest they heard her and came back to torment her. Presently she slept, mercifully drugged by exhaustion. But the child did not sleep. It wailed weakly.

At dawn Li Soo woke. She was parched. She dared not call. Hours passed. No one came near them. Where had Li Keen slept, she wondered.

Li Keen had not slept.

She had raved out in the *k'o-tang* all night long. And Li had let her rave. His disappointment was as great as hers. But his pipe helped him to bear it. And he remembered that Chu Poo's wife after the misfortune of two daughters had had the triumph of many sons. And he thought of Li Soo's beautiful feet. She should have another chance—at least one more chance.

And he told Li Keen so when she was calmer; sullen but quiet. He told her what he planned, and how she was to conduct herself for the present. And he convinced her that in this she dared not disobey him.

At noon Li Soo was lifted from the bed she had disgraced, and carried back to her own sleep-mat.

"Until the Bitter-moon comes again and once more again we will keep you, vile one. If then you have borne us a son, we will forgive you, even reinstate you in our gracious affection. If you do not, we will divorce you. I have spoken."

Li Soo made no reply, but her soul registered an oath.

The number-one went. And presently one of the women brought drink and gruel. And in her rough peasant way the woman was kind.

It was she who discovered, and indiscreetly told the girl-mother, what Li Soo had not suspected, that the child's tiny arm was broken.

The woman set it roughly, strapping it tight to a short length of bamboo.

"The tender bone was snapped in the strain of the birth-hour," An Win asserted.

But Li Soo knew what had broken her baby's arm. And again her soul took an oath.

That its spine was injured, a hump to show soon on its soft back, if it lived, no one suspected, not even its mother.

Li Ho never looked at his daughter. Li Keen always passed it with a sneer.

But Li Soo, selfish until now, loved her baby, and grieved that it ailed.

It was puny, scarcely grew, often was indifferent to its mother's welling breast.

Li Soo longed to escape with the child; but, because of it, she dared not attempt to go. There was food here, food allowed her freely enough. Without food she would have no milk for the babe. Even if she succeeded in running away—it would be slow-going on her crippled feet—how would they get food? Where shelter? The few small coins that she still had well hidden, to buy rice some day for Pang Kee, would not last them long, even if she got away and was not dragged back.

She knew that it was a wild dream, and she put it by, and stayed where they were—for her baby's sake.

For herself she might have risked the desperate attempt. But she would risk nothing that might injure her little child.

Three days after the birth Li Keen ordered Li Soo to get up and go to work in the sun-cooked sweet-potato patch.

Li Soo obeyed, staggering as she walked, the child slung against her breast.

She was glad to kneel as she weeded. Many of the small-footed can only work kneeling. But Pang Soo's feet had been well bound. They had not often hurt her until now. They pained badly to-day.

But she loved to feel her baby's head against her. And the day gave her pleasure, and the pleasure comforted and

cheered her. It was a golden day. The ripe grains rippled in the sunlight. The lemon roses were thick on their leafy trees. The honorable grave-mounds were companionable to the lonely exiled girl. The flowering grasses growing on them nodded to her kindly. The whitened poppy fields were lovely. The red and tawny lilies gave her welcome. A thrush sang to her.

It was good to be alive on such a day, in such a spot, unmolested, alone with her baby.

The child slept contentedly; once it smiled. Above the bandage the tiny arm was scarcely swollen.

Li Soo still wished to live.

CHAPTER XXIX

URGED to it by his wife, Li Ho bought two concubines. Li Keen selected them.

"They shall earn their rice," she promised him. "Two are more apt to get us a son than is one."

And Li Ho grunted his consent, and left the rest of it to her.

They came together; sturdy Kwantung peasants, flat-faced, unadorned. They looked never to have had an emotion between them. They ate gluttonously, and scarcely troubled to look about them or at each other.

Until she saw them Li Soo was sorry for them, the little heart or thought she had for aught but her ailing baby. But when she saw their brawny ox-like bodies, their broad cow-like faces, their expressionless eyes, she believed that they would suit Li Keen, and because they did, live comfortably enough on the farm of Li Ho; and they passed from her tepid, momentary sympathy.

Li Soo proved right.

Li Keen drove the new handmaidens vigorously, but the work she exacted from them was less and easier than they had done in their fathers' homes. And those homes had

been far more unfurnished than this. Concubinage had advanced them considerably; and they rejoiced. They obeyed Li Keen with heavy alacrity, if with no acute intelligence. The number-one was pleased with them. She desired obedience, and was willing to supply all needed intelligence herself.

They fell into step with the life of the place at once, and kept in step.

"I have selected them well," his wife boasted. And Li grunted agreement.

A little because they pleased her, more to display her acquisition, Li Keen invited a few of her friends to take tea with her, and to see Li's concubines. To swell her retinue and still further establish her "face," she commanded Li Soo to join in the festivity, clad in her best robes and wearing all the ornaments that she had. She even took the trouble to dress the secondary's hair and paint her face with her own hands.

Li Soo sat oddly still while Li Keen did this, and when the toilet was completed she thanked the woman politely.

"Will you graciously permit that I go and sit in the garden until you require me?" she asked softly.

"As well there as here. You are useless on your feet. Watch for the approach of the first guest, and when you see her turn into Frog-well Lane hasten to me and tell me. Watch from the walnut hillock. You can see the farthest from there."

Li Keen spoke less unkindly than she had spoken to the secondary since the child's birth. She still had much to do in last preparations for her guests. The woman was house-proud. She did not often entertain, but when she did, she did it with ostentation. Like many efficient women, she was narrowly self-sufficient, inclined to discount the help that others could give her; to trust none but her own hands, when she need only have trusted her own mind, directed others, and spared her own toil.

She was giving a boastful feast to-day. She had cooked

and prepared most of it herself. She had arranged and rearranged the *k'o-tang* and had decorated it herself.

She was inordinately proud of the new concubines, delighted to know that the women whom she had invited would blazon abroad that Li Ho was rich enough to buy two concubines at once, and to tell how richly his wife, their mistress, garbed them.

She gave a last look at the *k'o-tang;* by immemorial custom a room in which only the men of a household received, and received only men guests. Li Keen had decided to use it herself to-day. And when she told Li so, and instructed him to spend the afternoon in one of the far fields, and not to return to the house until the hour-of-the-dog, he had grunted assent. He had felt no surprise. Li Keen had taken her own way, even with time-hallowed customs, ever since he had known her. He neither expected nor wished her to change. The inarticulate man was fond of his tyrannical wife, and he approved her. Since his second marriage he had wished rather often that Li Keen's feet were as small as Li Soo's. But his steady affection was Li Keen's.

The first guest came a trifle late, the other four soon after. Li Soo sent no warning of their coming. Nor did she come to the *k'o-tang* herself.

If Li Ho had seen the girl on the hillock of walnut trees and had called her down and sent her on some other errand, or told her to weed the turnips, she'd berate him well when he came to his evening rice, Li Keen promised herself. And in her best clothes! He had done it once before—diverted Li Soo from a task of hers to a task of his own—and had paid for it! But then she had not been wearing her elegant satin trousers and her best new shoes. He'd pay more this time!

If the slut herself had forgotten—she was maddeningly absent-minded at times—or insolently had disobeyed, she would beat her, beat her sufficiently—for all that Li had forbidden Li Keen to do it again.

Perhaps the low no-one had fallen down and broken her worthless neck. The honorable number-one would not wear mourning over it.

She was angry with Li Soo's absence. The girl's elegant toilet and exquisite feet were assets that the number-one would have enjoyed displaying. And a secondary to order about added to a wife's prestige. Above all, the child at the girl's breast would have proved to the guests, and been prattled by them, that they were not, as perhaps it had been rumored they were, barren: she, Li Keen, and Li Ho, her husband.

But Li Keen did not altogether regret the number-two's absence. Her existence was established. Two of to-day's guests had seen her soon after she first came.

And the sickly child probably would have whimpered and wailed all the time. Unless it slept or sucked, it usually whimpered or wailed, and sometimes at its nursing, and when it slumbered. It always seemed in pain.

And Li Soo would not be parted from the child for an instant. Waking or sleeping, it rarely left her arms farther than to be tied on its mother's breast while Li Soo worked with her hands. And Li Ho had commanded, with the emphasis that even Li Keen dared not disobey, that in that Li Soo should not be thwarted.

On the whole it was as well, perhaps, that the girl and the babe were not here.

Her guests were enchanted with the entertainment Li Keen gave them. They cried out at the beauty of the elegant *k'o-tang*, they complimented her on her wonderful cookery, the delicious slug pastries, the sugar azaleas, the frog broth, the fat-sodden cakes—until she blushed with pleasure under her rouge.

The concubines behaved admirably.

The function began and lasted and ended without a hitch.

Li Keen was highly gratified.

But where *had* Li Ho sent Li Soo?

She'd demand that as soon as he came, and know it before she served him his evening rice.

But Li Keen did not speak with Li Ho until the next day.

She had eaten with extreme heartiness, to encourage her guests; and Li Keen enjoyed rich food. She lay down to "rest her rice" for a short time, and she fell asleep.

No one dared to disturb her, or wished to; least of all, Li Ho.

When at last she yawned herself awake the sun blazed high. Li Ho had been out in his fields for several hours.

Li Keen dragged up heavily, shook herself, and breakfasted without much appetite, on the broken meats of yesterday's feast.

Had they served their master his morning rice promptly, and as he liked it? she asked the younger concubine.

The girl didn't know, and with short-sighted truthfulness said so.

Li Keen slapped the younger concubine.

CHAPTER XXX

WHEN Li Keen had given Li Soo permission to leave the house, and had told her to go to the top of the high walnut hillock and watch from there for the first guest's coming, Li Soo waited until she knew that the number-one was busy in the *k'o-tang* before she went out of the house. But then she went at once.

She snatched up a small bundle from where she had hidden it.

The child lay quiet, completely covered by its little wadded quilt, in its little basket. Li Soo lifted it up carefully, baby, basket, quilt and all, listened a moment, and hurried silently out of the house.

She did not go towards the walnuts.

She made for a hidden hollow where ferns and wild

flowers clustered thick among the bamboos in a far part of the *chia.*

Halfway to her goal, she unexpectedly came upon Li Ho. He made no doubt that she was—as she should have been—on a sudden errand for exigeant Li Keen. But he told her to wait; and she did not dare disobey him.

Her heart thumped sickly. Would he open the cloth she carried on her arm? Would he lift the quilt, and look at the child? If he looked, would he *see?*

"Your little lilies go fast, Li Soo," the man said kindly, his eyes—as they often were—admiringly on her tiny red shoes.

"Your slave was told to be quick, very honorable."

Li Ho thought that highly probable. But he still detained her.

"Is the little-one better?" he asked.

Li Soo's frightened heart all but stopped beating.

"It is quiet," he added, approvingly. "Does it sleep? Or ails it less?"

"Little Fragrant Cucumber is well now, noble sir." She spoke as steadily as she could. "But, too, she sleeps now."

"Why carry you her so? The basket is cumbersomeness for you. I never saw you carry our little frog so before!"

Li Soo drew back a step; she did not dare go farther.

"I would not that my beautiful jacket is crushed, O my master, or that it should get stain."

The farmer laughed.

"When you bear me a son, lily-one, a slave-woman shall carry him for you. And if he stains a garment of yours, I will give you a handsomer one to replace it. You are beautifully dressed to-day, Li Soo. But your coat lacks a flower."

He turned and snapped off a spray of the oleander flowers and held it against her face a moment. Then Li Ho himself fastened it lingeringly in Li Soo's coat.

He had forgotten the child. Li Soo hoped that he had.

"Most gracious, may this worm and slave-one continue on her commanded errand?"

"You may go," he told her. But the girl knew that he said it reluctantly. "Go not so fast, however. It displeases me that your beautiful golden-lilies should be pained or wearied."

"They are joyous and very proud to go quickly in obedience to honorable Li Keen, noble gray beard."

"I will not that they go *too* quickly," the man insisted.

But he let her go then, and went on his own way in the opposite direction, to Li Soo's almost grateful relief.

She turned and watched him until he was out of sight, partly to make sure that he did not turn back, partly from an impulse of half kindness. He had been less unkind to her than Li Keen had. At times he had been carelessly indulgent to her. Rough as he was, his virility appealed to her. Li Ho might have won, at small cost, his young secondary's liking and loyalty. To-day—too late—he had gestured for it with a friendly word and an oleander spray. Li Soo had understood him. She looked after him with a cold, curling lip, but her eyes were a little wistful. She sensed that, at least to-day, he was ready to make her yoke easier, her life at the farm pleasanter. Could she hold her own against Li Keen now, she wondered, in part supplant her?

Too late!

She turned away again with a bitter smile and journeyed on to the distant bamboos.

She hurried as fast as she could.

Li Soo was crooning softly, a little cradle-song.

Her face was calm, but her throat was choking convulsively.

For Li Soo knew that her babe was dead.

She had known when it died.

She never before had seen death. But when the tiny body had stiffened suddenly, the tiny apricot face

"changed" oddly, mother-love's clairvoyance had understood. And Li Soo had hardened for all time.

The child had died at dawn.

For an hour the girl-mother lay with it close on her breast; loving it, caressing it.

She crooned to it, just breathing the soothing notes. She tried to give it her breast, but she knew that her baby was dead. She knew it before the tiny lips grew cold.

She tried to warm the tiny hands in hers; they grew colder and colder.

Li Soo dared not sob aloud; she scarcely was moved to sob, but slow cold tears dripped onto the dead baby's cold face. And Li Soo thought of Pang Kee.

She wanted her mother.

There are more graves than trees in China; many more graves than houses, many times more graves than there are living Chinese.

Its dead and its graves dominate China; menace its living, limit its husbandry injuriously.

But the graves of Chinese children are few. Unmarried boys and girls rarely are given funeral, not often a coffin. Dead babies are held of no account here or hereafter. The dung-heap is often their sepulcher, or the nearest ditch.

Li Soo knew what burial Li Keen would allow the little-wife's baby daughter.

She would thwart Li Keen of that.

When she heard that the house was astir, knew one of them might come to rouse her at any moment, she rose and straightened her sleep-mat.

She covered the child with its quilt.

She readied the flat basket in which it lay sometimes when she worked in the fields at a task with which it interfered if tied to her bosom or on her back.

Quiet as the dead child on the mat, she found what else she wanted—a garment or two, her few coins—tied them in a cloth, thrust the knotted cloth out of sight, and waited.

When Li Keen came to order the small-wife's toilet Li Soo obeyed her meekly, answered her and agreed with her sunnily.

Li Keen left her at last.

Then flight.

CHAPTER XXXI

SHE sat as long as she dared, hidden in the bamboos, nursing the child again in her arms, straining her eyes on its face, fondling its hands, fondling its tiny feet.

"The crows shall not eat you!" she told it with a last caress.

Then she laid it down.

She took off her festival jacket and her fine embroidered trousers. She unknotted the cloth and took out old work-day garments; when she had put them on, she crouched down, and tore at the soft-feathered grass.

With her trembling hands she scooped out earth, made her baby its death-bed. She dug with her hands, scraped with her nails, dug with a stone, scooped with her palms. Li Soo's hands were rough and strong now from field work. She rasped them raw. Her arms bled. The girl worked furiously and fast.

She laid ferns in the hole she had made. She wrapped her fine clothes about her baby; and laid it so again in the basket. She lowered the basket gently on the bed of ferns.

The oleander flower she held a moment looking at it consideringly.

He was its father.

He had given it to her.

He had been kind sometimes.

He was its father; and he had cursed it because she had not borne him a son.

Li Soo spat on the oleander before she flung it as far as she could.

There were wild flowers here.

She covered the robe-covered child with its tiny quilt, and covered the quilt with wild white roses, a handful of harp-flowers, more ferns. She put her red shoes, and her stick pins, all her few poor ornaments, among the ferns.

She put the earth in lightly at first. Then she packed it down.

She dare not make a grave-mound. She smoothed the ground, made it as nearly as she could as it had been. Feathered grasses would blanket it again in a moon. No one ever came here, Li Soo believed.

The girl stood a moment, her miserable eyes on the grave she had made.

A cry—just one; and she went away slowly, and did not look back. But she hid in her bosom the old cloth that had been her baby's outer shroud and disguise.

She did not know where she was going, but she knew she was going far; and because she would go far, she went slowly, to save her strength and to spare her squeezed feet.

She would never come back.

They never should find her.

Would they search for her? She doubted it. But Li Ho might. He could be stubborn even against Li Keen. She would take no risk. She would go as far as she could, on through the day and all of the night. To-morrow she'd hide, and again in the dark of night she would go—on and on—hiding by day, traveling by night—on and on until she had no fear that she might be overtaken and brought back.

She wished that she might have brought the little body with her; kept it her companion and treasure as long as she could. But she knew that that could not have been for long. It was better to have buried it in the place she knew, a spot she could always remember, the one place in all the *chia* that she had loved, there among the harp-flowers and violets growing with the bamboos, where she sometimes had sat with her baby in her arms, and rocked it and sang to it.

Li Soo held her head up. She kept her face calm. If a coolie met her, he must think that she was on some errand for their mistress.

But she met no one. No one had seen her, to report the direction she had taken. That was well.

She had gone perhaps half a *li* beyond the edge of Li's holding, and the sun was sinking, almost set. She must think now; she must plan more clearly than she had.

Her baby! Her little baby!

She could not go back to Pang Kee. Not in a year could she walk so far on her lily-feet. Nor would she return to shame Pang Kee, who she knew had so boasted of the splendid marriage; return ragged and unaccompanied, unmistakably a wife rejected and dismissed, divorced by a dissatisfied husband. Nor would she give Pang Kee, who had sacrificed so much for it, the grief of knowing that the marriage had been ill-treatment and misery.

But, O Kwan, Hearer of Cries, how she wanted her mother!

She knew now how Pang Kee had loved her. She measured Pang Kee's mother-love by her own. Had her mother borne her in such torture as she had borne Fragrant Cucumber? And loved her the more for it? Loved and cherished her the more because she was only a girl-one!

She'd go back some day, long years from now, go back silk-clad in a silk-hung litter, gold in her purse, white rice in her hands.

How would she accomplish that? "Only Kwan knows! But I will accomplish it. I have lost my child; I will go to my mother again."

She must rest awhile.

She sat down on the moss—how soft the moss was and how beautiful!—and ate a few of her persimmons. How beautiful they were! How delicious their smell! And they tasted the sweeter because gathering them in her flight, she had robbed them from Li Ho.

The sunset was soft in a delicate sky. It comforted her.

And it comforted her to think of how sweet the creamy roses had been, and how beautiful, that she had tucked about her baby, and to remember how the dragonflies had jeweled the silvery-green bamboos that circled the little grave.

Who was coming?

A man's shoe!

But only one man.

She must deceive him, if she could, if he took any notice of her. There was no place here that she could hide. Li Soo braced herself sternly, and went on eating the persimmons.

But she would not go back. They should not take her back.

The man was nearly here. He would see her in a moment, if he looked toward her at all.

He was here.

He stopped with an exclamation of surprise.

It was San Bin the cat-cutter.

CHAPTER XXXII

LI SOO would have given a great deal if it had not been San Bin; San Bin, who knew her so well.

And yet it might have been worse. She knew that San Bin hated Li Keen; she suspected that he had little liking for Li Ho.

In the fading light San Bin might not have recognized her. He was tired after a long, busy day in the City. He wanted his rice, his pipe and his night-mat. A peasant woman resting herself, half hidden by the great walnut tree, was nothing to San Bin. But when she put on her old rough clothes she had forgotten to take the thick paint

from her face—if she could have done it without wash-off oil.

If she had looked at herself in a pool she must have seen the startling contrast between her fine painted face and her plain coolie clothes. She had passed three mirroring pools. She had not looked at one.

In moments of crisis, believing that we have forgotten nothing, most of us are sure to have forgotten an important detail.

The chalk-white and rouge-rosed face above the plain faded jacket caught San Bin's indifferent eye at once, and he immediately saw who it was; and Li Soo, who knew that the old man was clairvoyant, would have been startled to know how instantly and how much he understood.

He shifted his pack from his back, laid his staff across it, and took off his spectacles and politely thrust them into his sleeve before he spoke.

"Your slave's diseased eyes rejoice to see you, noble lady-one."

"You have been to the City, honorable cat-artist?" She hoped he'd reply that he had come from Li's vegetable garden; that she might gather from him whether she had been missed yet.

San Bin bowed low, indicating his appreciation of the gracious interest her question expressed.

"I went there before dawn's first gray," the man told her.

"And have come directly from there?" The farm was midway between the City and here.

"Straight as a bird flies to its nest with a worm in its beak for its young."

"Met you many on your way, very old artist?"

"Many when I went, lady, none since I came through the City gate."

"I hope the day has prospered you."

"Excellently, kind and beautiful one. I have sold every

cat that I took to the market-place, my carry-pack is empty."

"Will rest here and eat a persimmon? They are excellent persimmons; you look wearied."

"Feet come," he whispered quickly, "the feet of a man."

"Hide me! Say not you saw me!" she pleaded, looking about wildly for some covering shelter. There was none.

"Come with me, be speedy, make no sound," he bade. He caught up the pack and the stick, which agitated Li Soo would have forgotten, gathered up the persimmons with more alacrity than could have been expected from his aged frame.

He led their way, keeping between her and the steps that were coming nearer. He made no sound nor did the girl.

The mud hut was snuggled low in a field of high grain and beans. Except by odd accident, only one who knew well where it was could have found it.

"In," San Bin said softly when he had opened the door.

Li Soo did not delay.

The old man caught up a bulging sack and hurried out with it. It was pocket-dark in the room, but he had known where the sack was.

Afraid to move, the girl stood and waited, her breast panting, her hands cold on each other.

But San Bin was back with her soon. She knew that the sack he let fall was empty.

He guided her to his stool.

"Rest," he said. "None comes to the door, I believe. But I have bolted it securely." Li Soo, quietly as he had done so, had heard him do it before he threw down the sack.

"They may come!" she panted.

"Find tranquillity, lily-one; none shall enter. San Bin will forbid them."

"They may insist; use force!"

"Not so. It is known that I have the evil-eye."

The girl shuddered, but better his evil-eye than the

blows of Li Keen, better his evil-eye than the mat of Li Ho!

"I find it a great convenience," San Bin added with a chuckle.

"Oh, pray you hush," she begged.

"Leave fear," he said gently; "our ears will hear if any approach. I have scattered the peanuts thick and far. They are but shells for burning. They will crackle like crackers if any step on them."

But he did not speak again for some time, and Li Soo hushed her breathing.

"They have passed by without turning in this direction," he said at last. And he struck a flint.

And San Bin was right. Shu A-fah had gone steadily on towards the City, limping a little on his weary feet.

The old cat-cutter lit a light.

For a long moment the tall, twisted candle made but feeble light. When the oil-soaked wick caught well into the thick, sturdy wax, all the small room was illuminated. Chinese candles are splendid steady light-givers.

The girl looked about her. Neither sorrow nor pain can smother a Chinese woman's curiosity.

There are many odd rooms in China. This was a queer room.

It was scrupulously tidy; it even was clean. For a Chinese room—and in a one-roomed mud-hut—it was surprisingly comfortable.

San Bin was an artist, though only an artist of wooden cats. He honored his work. And he was something dilettante. And for his few simple needs he was wealthy. He made his cats pay him well. His reputed evil-eye paid him as well.

In the City, in the strong-room of a rich man he trusted, he had stored an elegant coffin, and he had many coins in it; three silver *shoe* among the brass and coppers.

Here, the floor of pounded earth was bare. But the porcelain *k'ang* had a rich quilt on it, and the neck-rest was pierced lacquer inlaid with mother-o'-pearl and jade chip-

pings. The high-up window was paned with silk, not paper. No one could look into it without a ladder, and it had a stout inner night-blind of teak. The stool, too, was carved teak. The table matched the stool and had a top of red-veined gray marble. There was a crimson, black-charactered scroll on one wall; it said, as Lao Tzu taught centuries ago, "Be sparing of speech and all things will come right of themselves." A red lily bloomed in its pebble-filled bowl.

There were cats everywhere: cut-out, unpainted, stacked on the long low bench and beside it on the floor. San Bin's tools were orderly in a rush basket. Cats leaned against one wall; one grinned, eyeless yet, but already red-tongued, up from under San's low deal work seat. A dozen cats, fresh-painted, hung from the ceiling drying. Paints and brushes were on their wall-shelf, glass eyes glittered in their flat basket on another shelf.

There was one very beautiful thing here: the House-god, Tsao Wang: chief of the five principal household gods, whose cult is one of China's oldest, far older than the worship of most of the temple gods. For Home, sumptuous or lowly, is the paramount temple of every orthodox Chinese.

San Bin the cat-cutter was strictly orthodox. Almost all Chinese were in those days; agnostic, if educated, but sticklers in old observances.

This Tsao Wang was austere, severely beautiful; carved from ivory that many years had colored to the dun hue of winter-killed leaves. He wore no gorgeous satin garments, boasted no highly-colored lacquer. He did not frown or grin. San Bin's House-god, serene-faced, his delicate ivory hands folded on his ivory bosom, clad in the smooth folds of his long ivory gown, looked the holiness that a home-protector should be. The steel wall-bracket, his throne on which he stood, was as unspotted by ornament as his priest-like ivory robe was.

Near the god a torch of incense-sticks, ready for San Bin's tinder, waited in their vase of lead.

San Bin prepared their rice, his and his guest's. It was excellent rice, and unstinted. They ate together: Li Soo the little she could, San Bin his hungry fill.

"At daylight we will gather up the peanut shells," he said through a mouthful of honied walnuts. "They are excellent shells."

But when day came back Li Soo did not help to gather up the peanut shells. San Bin gathered them up alone, carefully, one by one. Two he overlooked. When he found them the next day he berated himself soundly.

When their rice was over and the gratitude cup drained, Li Soo would have washed the bowls they'd used, and cleared the table's marble top.

The old man prevented her.

"A host serves his guest, never a guest the host," he reminded her upbraidingly and shocked.

Li Soo ought to have quibbled and protested, reminding him that he was very old and she but new-born, ought to have protested and argued at great length, with elaborate compliments.

But she could not: the girl was worn out.

She scarcely protested when San forced her to the soft-quilted *k'ang,* scarcely knew that he lay across the door, stretched unquilted on the mud floor, a few uncut timbers his pillow.

When she woke, disgracefully late for a Chinese, Li Soo knew that she was ill.

Her feet pulsed and were burning. Her hands were ice; legs and arms twitched and ached, her back tortured her, and her lumping breasts were agony.

And the old man, who sat watching her anxiously, as he had been watching her anxiously for an hour, believed that she was very ill.

It proved so.

For more than a moon Li Soo suffered and moaned on San Bin's *k'ang*. He tended her like a mother. He tended her unaided. In her defense, since she hid and he knew she had fled, he did not dare get any one to help him. He nursed her alone, and he and her own strong peasant blood nursed her back to health.

There were long days when the old man did nothing else, nights when he did not lie down. There were days when he painted and tongued his cats and gave them their fierce eyes. But he never cut one, for that was noise. His clients in City and in homesteads lacked him. He never once went farther from his own door than his own patches of growing food. Once from the far side of his onion-bed he signaled a passing pedler, sent a message to a City shopkeeper. After that, meat and fish and all else San Bin wished were left at the edge of the onions, always after the sun had set.

The little he had not guessed, she told in delirium. And San Bin took a stubborn oath to serve her.

And Shu A-fah was searching Jade Happiness City for a man named Li.

CHAPTER XXXIII

WHEN early September turned the camel-high *kailong* purpled-red, its great tassels ready for harvest, Li Soo the fugitive went on towards Ho-nan. She was well and strong again.

San Bin was reluctant that she left him. Until she came his cats had sufficed him. He feared they would not suffice him now. He had grown accustomed to her presence, it was good to know that he would find her, his food ready, the kettle singing, when he had trudged back from the City, his pack emptier on his back, his wallet heavier on his girdle. Even in his work he had found her useful. She could not make or place the eyes, but soon fashioned and fastened the red tongues as well as he could. She

learned to paint the cheaper cats well enough; the better ones he never let her attempt to paint. But he trusted her to tongue them all. She was worth her rice to him—even a small wage presently, he told her.

Li Soo, too, was half reluctant to go. San's hut had grown a home to her. But, too, it was a prison. When he was abroad she scarcely dared go beyond the door, and never far. Even with him going ahead to look-see, she dared not venture beyond the walnut tree—scarcely so far. Nor could San Bin advise it. She might not go with him to the City. When he was late in returning she dared not make a light, still less unbar the door. Often the hut grew sickeningly hot and close when the door was fast and the window shuttered.

San Bin could not deny that she was too near, many *li* too near, Li Ho's homestead for her safety.

And when advantageous opportunity came, he advised her to take it.

"A friend of my youth journeys to Giant Cactus City to-morrow," he told her. "He is a merchant of wealth. Business called him to Jade Happiness. His business there is finished. A wife is with him. He feared to leave her behind him in Giant Cactus, for there is a feud between her and his great-wife. In his absence the great-wife might have done the small-wife an injury. Ao Chi would not have it. So, at much inconvenience, and to the number-one's much anger, he brought his young shut-in with him. They journey in style and comfort. The cart she rides in is hooded. When he does not stay with her he rides his palfrey. At the hour-of-the-hare they will pass Four-High-Arch-Bridge. You may go with them, if you will. I am sore to part with you. But, since you must go, this opportunity appears truly to be gods-sent. We can trust Ao Chi."

"But the woman?"

"Ao Chi answers for her. And she knows not the dialect of Shensi. Ao Chi has told her that my married daughter

desires to go to her husband in Ho-nan, and that to do me kindness he has promised to carry you as far as Giant Cactus City."

If he had hoped that Li Soo would hesitate, San Bin was disappointed. She did not hesitate for an instant.

The next day at the hour-of-the-hare she was waiting at Four-High-Arch-Bridge when the blue-hooded red Peking cart creaked to them; and Li Soo climbed into it quickly, and the cart jolted on at once.

Li Soo looked her part.

The cat-cutter had brought her new whole raiment—a change of it—when he returned last night, a rattan basket of necessaries. And he had given her a modest store of small coins. He would have given her more, if there had been time for him to get it from where he kept it in Jade Happiness City. But he had wrung a promise from Ao Chi to see her respectably housed in Giant Cactus City and to befriend her there. Even with some additional coins. San Bin would repay him, if they met again.

A girl, younger than she, jerked up on an elbow as Li Soo lifted the blue denim curtain, looked at her sourly, and turned away crossly.

Li Soo was not sorry that they could not speak each other's dialects. Ao Chi's small-wife looked, Li Soo thought, as apt to injure Ao Chi's great-wife as to be injured by her.

She would, Li Soo resolved, propitiate this so evidently displeased one, if it became possible. In the meantime, whether welcome or unwelcome, it was much to be conveyed so far. She knew what slow and painful going it would have been for her on her own unaided golden-lilies.

She bowed politely and huddled down meekly, as far as she could from the silk-clad.

It was not comfortable in the cart. Li Soo never had been in one before. Even oddly adaptable Chinese bodies take years to accustom themselves to the rough action of

Chinese carts. The merchant's small-wife was sprawled at comparative ease on quilts and cushions. The rest of the cart's interior space was crowded with bales and boxes. More than once a box lurched against Li Soo, and hurt her.

A rough-edged one cut her arm, and Li Soo involuntarily cried out.

The other woman laughed.

Li Soo did not cry out again. But she had the same cause to, several times, before the cart went on without her.

For two days and three nights they journeyed on; the fugitive in constant discomfort which she was glad to bear stoically, since it was taking her farther and farther from Li's farm, nearer and nearer to safety.

She slept the second night, to wake stiff-necked and bruised. It was pain to turn her head at first.

She shared the other's food. She did not get the tit-bits, but Ao Chi saw to it that she got enough. His secondary pouted, but made no other protest. She dared not; and she was keeping her wiles and power for use at home when her will and the great-wife's should clash and clinch again. And the girl was wily: she knew when she could and when she could not cross her lord safely. She had not been his a year yet, but she knew that what the man had promised he would not fail to do. And she knew that he had promised the old man to give his daughter safe and honorable escort. But the unwanted woman's unexpected presence rankled bitterly.

And it was a little hard on the spoiled small-wife. They had been so happy, she and her husband, he so tender and indulgent, all the time that they had journeyed to Jade Happiness! She had counted on a return journey as sweetened—except for the distastefulness of going back to the tyranny and curtailments of the courtyard she shared with the hated great-wife. On their way to Jade Happiness Ao Chi scarcely had left her; now he kept his way, for most of it, on his sturdy palfrey. But she kept her rage and dis-

appointment in leash measurably, kept it as well as she could, until the third day of the strange girl's intrusion.

On the third day disappointed vanity infuriated her, and at last feminine fury broke its frail bonds.

The young wife leaned over Li Soo and suddenly jerked off Li Soo's shoe, curious to compare Li Soo's lilies with her own.

Li Soo made no protest. She was indignant at the liberty that only great intimacy and liking condones, even among peasant women; but she was determined to endure even more than this—to be carried (and freely fed) as far as possible from Li Ho and Li Keen.

Unluckily Li Soo's feet were even smaller than the other's.

Their eyes met as Ao S'en measured. Li Soo smiled unkindly, thoughtlessly. The other spat an ugly term, and hurled the guest's shoe at her viciously. It struck Li Soo's bandaged foot. Li Soo winced, but gave no other sign. She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep.

At their rice-time Ao Chi pushed aside the cart's heavy cloth flap to speak with his small wife-one while she ate. He gave her a little cluster of purple grapes. But he gave Li Soo another, and he smiled at her kindly. Li Soo, taken unaware, and glad to have the fruit, smiled back.

That flamed it.

Screams such as only a maddened Chinese woman can make rent the air, threatened to rend the red Peking cart's stout blue hood.

If the man had not prevented it, the angry woman's nails would have ripped Li Soo's face; she did jerk off Li Soo's head-band before the man caught her wrists and held them firmly.

"*Aie! Aie!*" the little-wife screeched dementedly. "Look-see! Look-see! She is a vile one, *your* frail, Ao Chi! A woman of the flower-boats that you take with you to Giant Cactus to pollute your heaven's-well, to put shame and wrong upon your wives and on your chaste and

honorable concubines! Look-see! Look-see! Her hair brands her! I suspected it. That is why she wore her go-out-of-house band all the time; wore it here in the seclusion of my curtained cart-room, my pure seclusion into which you thrust her."

She screamed and raved interminably. Ao Chi knew that it was hopeless to stop her. Her own fatigue would stop her sometime. Nothing else would. The man shrugged, and let her screech and rave it out.

He looked at Li Soo's unbanded forehead, and he smiled slightly.

So, his old friend's daughter was not a first-wife, but a secondary. The cat-cutter's pride had lied. Ao Chi did not think hardly of San Bin for that. The lies of "face" are readily pardoned between Chinese.

Ao S'en had no right to assume offense. She herself was but a small-wife. Her fringe of hair lay thick on her forehead, as a secondary's should. This other woman's "hair-fringe" was neither so thick nor so long as a wanton's; neither thicker nor nearer her eyes than was Ao S'en's own.

It was foolish of San Bin to have deceived about it. As for San Bin's daughter, probably she had but obeyed her father: filial piety.

With her fringe pushed back, to grow long and presently not be a fringe, or with it thick to midway on her forehead, San Bin's daughter-one was rarely beautiful. Were she a virgin—yes, even were she a widow-one, he gladly would install her in his harem. And his other women could screech and foam about it as they would.

Ao S'en was tiny, fragile-looking; it had been half her charm for big and lusty Ao Chi. But she had a strong and robust throat, if ever a Chinese woman had one, and there was nothing in the world the matter with her lungs. She continued to scream until Ao Chi grew frightened. That his servants heard her was nothing. Little doubt their own women did it on occasion. And Chinese men have

no false shame before their servants. But angry as he was with her—and he was very angry—he was afraid that this paroxysm might injure one far more precious to him than she was. Since she was with child he would not punish her, nor could he let her cry and shiver indefinitely. The child might be a son!

Ao Chi called to the carter to stop, and when the driver had, Ao Chi motioned Li Soo to climb out of the cart—and assisted her to do it, although in helping her he had to put his hands on her, an all but inexcusable infringement of Chinese decency. But even in China desperate ills require desperate remedies. Ao Chi all but lifted Li Soo out of the Peking cart.

And Ao S'en, triumphant, kicked Li Soo's few poor belongings out after her. Ao S'en's golden-lily ached for days.

CHAPTER XXXIV

LI SOO had understood none of their words, but she had understood their significance; it had been unmistakable.

She had known what Ao S'en felt towards her, and feared from her. She had guessed rather accurately the attraction she had had for Ao Chi, and she wished that it might have proved strong enough to defy the jealous young wife until they had reached Giant Cactus City. She had no wish to join his household. Ao Chi had not attracted her. But she knew that her lone way was periled. She wished that she might have been taken to Giant Cactus safely.

What should she do now?

Not sit here long! She might be discovered and questioned before the hour was more by a minute. That would come, of course. She must earn; and to earn she must meet and be met, speak and be spoken to—if she could make herself understood and understand. But it must not come yet. She must be many *li* more distant from her hus-

band's farm before she approached any one or let any one question her. And before she did either she must determine on some plan and determine what account and explanation she'd give.

It would need to be a shrewd plan, need to be an unusual and convincing explanation. The girl was ignorant, but there are things that the most ignorant girl in China knows. Li Soo knew that no Chinese woman, not even an off-cast sing-song girl, wandered about China alone.

First she must get to better hiding than this. Then she would think.

She gathered her few possessions together, and moved off through the sparse undergrowth. When the roadside shrubs were thicker, and she so tired that weariness warned her that some rest would be a sensible economy, she sat down, munched a sparing meal, and determined what to do.

She would go on and on, not to the *hisen* Giant Cactus City—even if she could find it; safer not, she decided, but in that general direction. The Day-star should be her compass. She would find and take food wherever she could. The crops were ripe. She knew berries and roots and leaves that were nourishing. When she came to a hamlet she would beg, or work, if work could be found and paid for. She would earn until she had the price of a basket of rice and of new rich garments and of journey-money to Pang Kee. When she had accomplished that she would go back to her mother.

It would take years to accomplish: Li Soo realized that.

She would not turn towards Shantung yet, not directly towards Shantung. But it should be her goal. She would loop towards it continuously, going West now, to go East when luck a little mended; that so she might have the less distance to go when she at last had the coins she needed.

She had made up the tale she would tell. And she had confidence in herself. She was frightened, alone for the first time. But that had to be borne. She curled up on

the cloth that held all she owned, and at last she slept.

When she woke at daylight Li Soo wept a little. Then she got up and went on.

Just as she made her midday-rice in a turnip field, stealing it cautiously, watching and listening anxiously, Shu A-fah knocked at the gate of Li Ho's houseplace.

And a servant whom Ao Chi had sent back to her with food and a small gift of money, and with an appointment at a tea-house near Giant Cactus market-place, was searching for Li Soo vainly.

Shu A-fah did not get in. His polite message to Li Ho that he had come from Shantung shut the gate in his face effectually.

He lingered in the neighborhood, and questioned industriously.

What he saw of the *chia* impressed him. He learned beyond a doubt that Pang Soo was married to a rich man. But he also learned that she was not a first-wife. He did not learn of the birth of her child. But he did learn that Li's great-wife was childless.

Was Li Soo happy? He would not go far until he learned, and beyond doubt, the answer to that.

The servant that Ao Chi had sent back to Li Soo as soon as his scream-wearied small-wife slept soundly searched with moderate diligence. He grunted his approval of a tassel he found in a thorn bush. He recognized it, and searched a little farther. Before long he sat down indifferently, and ate as much of the excellent rice as he could, pocketed the coins, and rode leisurely back to his master. He thrashed the pony as hard as he dared before he overtook the Peking cart and its dusty attendant calvacade, that its anger might make it sweat, and its nostrils grow red as a colt's do who has been ridden hard.

Ao Chi joined his returned messenger at once, halted behind the others while he questioned him. And Ao S'en lifted up a blue denim flap, and watched them.

"Did find the girl?"

"Eminent-one, I found her. I found her with difficulty, but I searched with very great diligence. I remembered that you had spoken to find her before I came back to your Excellency, and I obeyed." The coolie voice creamed with the coolie's virtuous devotion.

"Where did you find her?" Ao Chi watched his man narrowly.

"Almost a *li* from the spot at which she descended from your elegant cart, Master."

"Had she turned back?"

"She had not turned back, ancient and eminent. She had moved off into the grain at the right direction from where we had left her. She welcomed me, sir. She welcomed the rice you sent, and the generous gift of coin pieces."

"And my message? You delivered it with care?"

"I delivered your radiant words with exemplary exactness, older-than-three-centuries. I directed her how to find the packet-boat and where to leave it. I bade her employ the first wheelbarrow that came upon her; that she might sit in it at ease while the barrow-man pushed her to the canal. I instructed her, as from you, to employ another wheelbarrow-carriage when she left the packet-boat, and to journey so to the tea-house. I instructed her what to say to Fan To the tea-house keeper, and to linger there until your Eminence graciously joined her."

"Speak you true words?" Ao Chi snapped.

"This worm speaks words of jadelike veracity!"

"Hm'm."

"And I bring you, in proof that I have, a token!"

The rascal gave Ao Chi Li Soo's girdle-tassel cautiously.

Ao Chi took it as cautiously.

"You have done well, Pig Wan. I reward you."

"My reward is to have served my radiant, very old master." But Pig Wan took the coin that Ao Chi offered.

"She will obey?"

"The woman was overjoyed. She required me to repeat twice your honorable directions. She will journey with such speed as she may, she will journey with all circumspection. She will await you at the tea-house of Fan To. She will await you there with trembling impatience."

Ao Chi smiled.

Pig Wan grinned behind the sleeve with which he mopped from his face the beaded sweat of honest toil.

"Keep silence to all!" the master commanded.

"My mouth is sealed with the opiumed honey of your strict instruction, my noble employer."

"It is well. Take you your rice now."

Pig Wan bowed obsequiously low on his high saddle, and Ao Chi went back to his rankled secondary. And when he had disappeared into the crimson, blue-hooded cart, the servant shook with mirth.

But the rogue was wrong—at least in part. Ao Chi had admired the face of Li Soo. He considered her eyebrows admirable. His heart had thrilled disturbingly when he regarded her feet. He had known that he'd enjoy to fondle her dimpled apricot hands. He would not be reluctant to see her again at the tea-house of Fan To.

But he would not deal dishonorably by the daughter of his old-time friend San Bin the cat-carver—if she was his daughter. At the tea-house he would probe that—and conduct himself in accord with the result.

It was not to gratify his own regrettable appetite for dalliance that Ao Chi had sent the servant back to the woman. He had done it to keep his word to befriend the girl. He had promised San Bin, and he was Chinese.

CHAPTER XXXV

TEN years passed. Pang Kee lived them in loneliness and often in want.

Ten years since she had stood shading her tortured eyes

with a trembling hand, that she should see the longer Pang Soo's bride-chair as they carried Pang Soo from her.

She had strained herself body and nerve for Pang Soo, depleting her store of personal strength and stamina as she had emptied and scraped bare the treasure-hiding hole under the one-room hut. She had nothing left. She had given Pang Soo all. She had spent her last coin for the cheap trappings of her child's inferior marriage procession.

And she was proud and content.

Her life was finished. She'd not see Pang Soo again. She had no hope that she'd ever hear from Li Soo, scarcely a hope that in some miracle way she might hear of her. Such peasant mothers rarely can keep a cord between them and their daughters who happily have married to better state and gone to far distant courtyards.

She was done. Alone.

Such life as was left her could give her nothing.

She was content to die when she should.

She was content to live while she did.

Life was cold, hungered.

The after-of-life menaced her. It would be perpetual punishment, since she had no son to worship, and teach his sons and theirs to worship, at her grave. Shu A-fah refused her adoption; there was none other she could procure.

But Pang Kee no longer cared.

She sat in the sun, and warmed her, when she could.

She huddled in the cold, and shivered, when she must.

She ate when she might.

She hungered almost indifferently.

But she was not unhappy—except when her worn heart recovered for a time and ached to see her only child.

Old age pounced upon her almost in a day, as old age does with women who have used youth and maturity too hard.

She had worked hard and valiantly, almost from the day

she could toddle. Now she was listless, more ready to want than for exertion. She had crumpled, and she did not care. She was swathed and shackled in lassitude. Partly this was physical exhaustion, quite as much it was the lassitude of reaction; reaction from a great object accomplished and finished.

The door-cat, whom Pang Soo had loved and sometimes caressed, was Pang Kee's only living companion after Pang Soo went. The frog had gone.

The cat and Pang Kee grew thin together—thinner and thinner.

When she no longer could feed it, or spare it the prey it caught, Pang Kee unchained the cat, and drove it forth; to fend for itself and so live a little longer, if it could.

And Pang Kee was alone.

She did not often think for long at a time. When she thought, she thought of Pang Soo. She no longer gave a thought to Shu A-fah. He had rejected what she had considered a generous offer. She dismissed and forgot him. The fantastic old craving for rice had left her. She wanted nothing. Nothing interested her.

The third winter after Pang Soo's marriage she might veritably have starved, had it not been for Woo Hsi, the priest of the Caterpillars.

Winter is cruel in Shantung. This winter was exceptionally severe. Food and fuel were scarce. Only the well-to-do could buy them. Thousands of Shantung families gnawed twigs and sucked icicles. Pang Kee's nearest neighbors ate the thatch of their roof, and rejoiced to find a worm in it here and there.

But more than once Woo Hsi came to her hut and brought food to Pang Kee; not enough, but more than he could easily spare. And when he came he had stayed for an hour, and led the woman to talk to him. For he feared what unbroken solitude might do to her who never had been alone since Pang Soo was born.

He brought succor and he sent it. And the hard winter passed. The violets came back to Shantung with a spring of elfin beauty. And Pang Kee responded to it. The little flowers that peeped up, the larger flowers that hung down, the fresh soft leaves on old gnarled trees, the singing of thrush and blackbird, the music of the brook, young green astir on the fields, amethyst a haze on the hills, quickened her pulse again, brightened her eyes. The peasant woman grew stronger.

One day she suddenly thought of her old desire: rice.

At sunrise she went towards the City, found a slight task and did it. At sunset she hoed in her garden. Day by day her lips took a firmer set. Week by week a new hoard of small coins grew in the old hiding-place. When it was enough she would buy a handful of rice. The thought thrilled her, the absurd old obsession strengthened her. She had an object once more. It companioned her.

Her sap of life flowed again; slower than it had been, sluggish often, but life.

The next winter was milder. Pang Kee earned as much as she spent. And her eyes were still quick and sharp for wayside findings. Woo Hsi still befriended her.

At Clear Brightness he died.

But Pang Kee did not despair; she did not fall back badly. The hidden coins grew slowly, but they crept to more. When she added one she almost could taste the rice that she would boil in her cook-pot yet.

And when her times were hardest, the peasants of the poor countryside, almost as impoverished as she, spared her pinches of grain, an egg, a sweet potato, a stick for her fire. For they pitied her solitude, and they admired her grit. Not one of them that did not put up a stern fight against the stinging poverty that clutched at their throats and menaced their children. But they said to each other that her fight had been stiffest and bravest. And she fought alone now. They all had family—the great bulwark of Chinese existence. Lame Ho Nun had his blind mother.

Sing Wo the leper had his leper wife. Palsied Cee Hang had his one-armed grandson. She had no one.

Out of their little they in turns spared her something. And Kwan recorded it on the tablets of Heaven.

And Pang Kee lived; the rice-money grew.

Twice again she had almost enough; then disaster came and took or lessened it.

But the woman did not give up; she would not despair, and she could not, because she had forced herself to persist so long and so hard that unwavering persistence was a habit she could not break.

But time crept over her; if slowly, surely, relentlessly. The snow that crowned her grew scanter and scanter. Her eyesight was less. She liked to close her eyes, and sit in the sun, remembering flowers and sunsets she had seen long ago. Her hands trembled oftener; and those hands, so long horn-hard with toil, grew soft with the pathetic exquisite softness that the flesh of babies and of those who are very old share. Her hearing was not so good, but she still liked to hear the birds sing.

And because she was so old the Chinese peasants reverenced her; always gave her great courtesy and sometimes gave her food—not as careless charity, but in respectful homage. Hui K'ang overpaid her to sit among his cotton-plants and scare away the thievish birds, and paid her no less gladly because he knew she slept there under the golden quilt of the sunlight, slept so sound and long that the birds ignored her, fed at her feet, lit on her shoulder and pecked at her sleeve. And when he begged her acceptance of her wage Hui K'ang bowed low and thanked her for the unrivaled efficiency and tireless vigilance with which she had aided him.

And Kwan recorded it.

When her dimming mind was clearest she thought of Pang Soo—and smiled.

She forgot that Pang Soo had gone, or thought her gone on a short errand.

She waited for Pang Soo.
Often she waited for rice.
But oftenest she dozed.
And presently Pang Kee waited only for death.
But at last the Dragon neared her.
Pang Soo had been gone from her ten long years.
She had almost forgotten Pang Soo.
She had forgotten rice.

CHAPTER XXXVI

TEN years passed.

In no day of them did Shu A-fah's one object change or slack.

To reach Pang Soo, to *know* whether it were well with her or ill, to serve her in some way—even though she never learned that he was near: these were all he wished for himself.

The baby who had taken his rose in the old city square at fair-time had made him hers for his lifetime. And, in his devotion, he was as nearly selfless as virile masculinity can be. He knew now how greatly he craved her for himself. For his self was strong, its core red and keen under its cloak of Chinese reticence and stern self-control. But it was her happiness that he craved most.

Was she happy?

He *must* know that.

He mistrusted the *mei-jên*. They were a nefarious pack; the best of them time-serving, gluttonous of fees, sparing of truth, decorative of facts, devoid of conscience.

He doubted the *mei-jên*, and he did not overrate Pang Kee's shrewdness. His heart was tender to the mother of Pang Soo, warm to the woman who had befriended him. But he counted her dull, heavy of small mind, no match for the much experienced matchmaker.

He would learn the truth concerning Pang Soo and

her placement, her contentment, if she were contented.

If all were well with her, he would keep near her, ready to serve her, or to shield and defend if her need came. He would find some toil that would feed him in the city that neighbored her new lord's *chia*. He would keep in the shadow of Li's wall. In some way, and it should be soon, he would gain acquaintance with men who were servants of Li, hear from them the women's gossip of the place, divide it by ten, and so learn with certainty how it fared with the dear lily-one for whom he had made a melon-patch which had pleased her, between the cabbages and onion-bed that "gardened" Pang Kee's hut.

He knew that to do as he planned would require time. Shu A-fah was prepared to spend time. He was prepared to spend life or lifetime in service of little Pang Soo; eager to render to her what was hers. If she were content, it should be his content. If ever peril threatened her he would snatch her up and carry her from it—in his arms—as he had carried her home from the fair, as he had carried her when her just-binded feet had ached.

He mistrusted the *mei-jên*, he mistrusted the judgment of Pang Kee; and he knew how life had driven her.

For himself—for himself selfishly—he beseeched the gods that once more he might have sight of her. At the Lanterns Feast it might be possible. And if the gods granted it he would pay them greatly with scented prayer-sticks and with fluttering red rags-of-worship.

Ten years passed.

Shu A-fah never wavered.

All his manhood, surging hot and demanding often enough, was chaste because in Shantung a baby had laughed at him over a rose she cuddled.

Ten years passed. And he saw Li Soo, and had speech with her; served her. And she repulsed him.

She drove him away; he returned to her.

She hid from him; he found her again.

She upbraided him; he accepted it, craved her forgiveness.

His purpose held. His love never wavered. A Chinese peasant who could neither read nor write, knew not his father's name, or if it had been his mother's. Much of a man, not little or unessentially a gentleman: Chinese!

No Chinese hesitates to speak to another without an introduction. On street, in city square, at the tea-house, men of high rank chat together without asking or wondering each other's names. A coolie may accost a lord-one as freely, without offense. China is the land of ceremonial and of etiquette, but not of formality. When Shu A-fah at last ferreted out the names and family homes of several men who were employed by Li Ho and discovered where they diced, which temples held the gods they favored, he got to know them readily and naturally. He even spoke with Li Ho himself several times. But he made no headway with the master, who needed no extra coolie, and if he had, employed only men of his own Province. And from the other men he gained little. They either knew nothing, or would disclose nothing, of their employer's intimate family affairs to an outsider. Li Ho was of much wealth, they stated. He had four wives, sixteen concubines and forty children, all sons. He owned a rich mine and a thousand mules; attempting to aggrandize themselves by aggrandizing him. Shu A-fah understood and approved their making of "face," but as information he considered it valueless. And probe as he would, and diligently did, in the City, he learned no more.

Li Keen was in high good-humor the day that a gate-coolie told her that a blind fortune-teller, who had charms to sell, and could play the *kin,* craved her patronage.

Both of the new concubines indubitably were pregnant. And the astrologer had foretold the birth of boys. Li

Keen liked them both, for Li Ho showed no preference for either of them.

The three women sat sewing in their own courtyard. But even the great-wife pushed and pulled her needle perfunctorily, and the others yawned more than they spoke; all three were bored and drugged by the heat of the day. The willow trees were motionless. The water in the lily-pool was hot.

Li Keen commanded, "I will admit the blind-one. If he amuses me satisfactorily, I will reward him suitably."

And when the fortune-teller came, feeling and tapping his way with his stick, Li Keen put down her embroidery-frame as promptly as the concubines did their coarser, heavier work.

The mendicant bowed. He bowed in the wrong direction, his back not his face to the women; crass bad manners, amiably pardoned a blind man. And if he had had his sight, he'd not have been allowed here at all!

"We are here, blind-one," Li Keen called to him.

He swung round and bowed deprecatingly and almost in the proper direction.

"Give him a stool!"

A slave-girl—Ah Shee was her name—obeyed quickly.

"Sit."

The blind man found the stool with the tip of his cane, and lowered himself on to it cautiously. Safely on it, he thanked Li Keen profusely for her gracious permission to one so low and unworthy to sit in her perfumed presence, to sit even on the elegant stool which she herself, it was not impossible, on occasion sat on.

He spoke slowly and with evident care, his use of mandarin, the universal speech used by Chinese of different Provinces to each other, was halting and not colloquial.

"Of what Province are you?" Li Keen asked.

"Of Pechili," he told her.

"You are welcome in Shensi," she said. He gestured humble thanks.

"This unfortunate, entirely unworthy of your distinguished patronage, craves your golden permission to show you his infallible charms, to unroll for you the scroll of your future, and to discourse sweet music for your enjoyment. The three arts are his. In what order will the great lady accept them?"

"Play music to us first! I love the *kin,*" the concubine Li Zin cried before the great-wife could answer.

Li Keen frowned—then she shrugged and smiled. For Li Zin was the one who might, the stars had hinted, bear twin boys. Three sons born now would obviate all necessity of purchasing any more potential mothers; and Li Keen was close. A young, healthy concubine cost at least many *yuan,* and Li Ho, so admirably indifferent to these two, might favor the next one.

"The musical instrument," the great-wife agreed. "Can sing?"

"My singing has been ecstatically praised," the man boasted confidently.

He bent over the *kin,* his sightless eyes vacant on the courtyard, searching it sightlessly. He struck the *kin* softly, and sang to it clearly.

The women were enraptured—the wife, the concubines and the servant-women—although they could not understand the words he sang. It was a popular Shantung song. When it was ended he waited and listened, turning his head this way and that listlessly, his sightless eyes everywhere vacant and meaningless.

He sang again. The old man's voice had kept its youth, and his hands were unwrinkled and unspotted, as the artist's hands so often are to the last. Music had kept his fingers supple—and unaged.

Morning-rice was not long over when he came to the courtyard of Li Keen. The Day-star sank towards its gorgeous setting when he left them.

But the food the great-wife commanded Ah Shee to bring him he did not eat. His thanks for it were profuse;

but he did not taste. With the great lady's very gracious permission he would carry it in his sleeve when she dismissed him. He would eat it gratefully and humbly in some appropriately humbler place. Twice they pressed him to eat, but he would not. Nor would he drink the bowls of tea they brought him; not even when the great-wife's voice took a sound of anger.

He was under a vow, he told her, not to eat or drink until after the hour-of-the-pig. If he broke his oath, his second-sight was dimmed, even his charms would be less potent. That appeased her, and they urged him no more.

But if he would neither eat nor drink, he lingered with them.

He displayed his charms, permitted—even invited—them to handle them.

He told their fortunes, and if his use of mandarin halted, the fortunes he foretold soared eloquently and richly. The great-wife's fortune was best of all.

She bought a charm for herself, two lesser ones for the two concubines. She even bought the cheapest one and threw it to the serving-women to scramble for.

Persistent bargaining is the essential essence of all Chinese barter. But this odd old man was almost docile in accepting the fraction of his valuations that Li Keen offered.

When at last they let him go—even dominant Li Keen did not dare absent herself from serving Li his evening-rice—the man was obsequiously even more reluctant to go than she to have him go.

They clamored for him to come again.

He promised it gratefully.

Li Keen rewarded him—a Chinese promise must be kept, even a woman's—with a small coin. He accepted it with expressions of delight that would have been adequate for the largess of an Emperor.

And Li Keen bade Ah Shee guide him to the outer gate. It was less trouble than to have sent for a gateman.

The girl had to put her hand on the blind man's sleeve twice to pull him away from a misstep. Each time she did so, he gave her arm a sly caress and she giggled softly, and the man smiled at her kindly. The blind have sharp ears.

Out of heaven's-well, the fortune-teller slackened his slow pace.

"Fair one!" he exclaimed passionately, love and longing vocal on his lips.

Ah Shee giggled invitingly. "How know you of my face, blind-one?" she demanded coyly.

"Your golden voice tells me. Only very lovely women have such exquisite voices."

Ah Shee cooed. But she called him a flatterer.

Shu A-fah denied it.

And so on—

Flirtation has a sameness everywhere: from Greenland to Patagonia, from Paris to Peking.

Near the outer gate, the man asked indifferently, "How many women has your master?"

The girl began to enumerate them obligingly.

"Old Li Keen, his number-one," she began. "She has the face of a codfish, and the temper of a hungry gate-cat when a dozen wasps have stung it. She is one. The two concubines make three."

"Is there a small-wife?" the man interrupted indifferently.

"Not now-time." The man's heart lost a beat. His feet staggered—a blind man's infirmity. "She was hated by the number-one. We others did not always dislike her. Sometimes Li Ho liked her too well—for the temper of Li Keen. Li Keen drove Li Soo away, or killed her perhaps. We know not. She was here, then she was not here; neither she nor her ailing girl-child. She was a girl of Shantung. She had beautiful feet. But she was a no-one. She came with poverty garments, in a plain chair. Li Ho married her from the chair. The concubines make three. Fug To and

Lu Sin make five." The girl went on enumerating and explaining briefly.

The man was not listening.

But at the outer gate, before the gatekeeper came to unbar it, he asked huskily, "Come you to the City ever, fair-one?"

"I can do sometimes. And sometimes Li Keen sends me."

"Will come to me, for a cup of wine, at Mo Fo's tea-house? Every day I will wait and watch there until you come, if you will tell me the most favorable hours for your fragrant coming. I would reveal your fortune to you. I dared not in the presence of the jealous others. It is radiant fortune, very fair one!"

Ah Shee squealed with delight.

"I will come," she gurgled. "At the hour-of-the-fowl, a soon day. Kwan protect you, noble-one."

"Kwan be with you," he returned.

When the gate was barred behind him, Shu A-fah flung from his sleeve the food that Li Ho's wife had given, and spat upon it.

CHAPTER XXXVII

LI SOO knew no geography. She believed, as almost all Chinese, and all of her caste, did, that the world was flat, and that China completely or very nearly covered it; that to pass beyond the edge of China would be to fall off the edge of the world, and be lost in a bottomless abyss.

She never had heard of a foreigner. She knew nothing of the Five Races.

She knew that in the Son-of-Heaven's endless Empire there were many Provinces. She knew the names of three: Shantung—where she'd been born; Shensi—this; and Chihli—where the Emperor dwelt in a Forbidden City, paved with chiseled gold, walled by pink and purple jasper.

But she knew the points—the *five* points—of the Compass; every Chinese does.

And she knew that she was going south—and why.

She was going on and on to put more and safer distance between her and Li Ho.

She was going south because, when she had questioned him, San Bin had told her that it was in the South that rice grew.

For herself, she now was minded to live, determined to wring competence, ease and adventure from life. For the Chinese peasant girl was innately persistent. Not even the suffering at Li's farm had quelled that, not even her child's death had broken it. She intended to go on, she intended to succeed, to mend and garnish existence for herself. But first of all she would get an armful of rice, and take it to her mother. She had no idea how she'd do it, but she knew that she would do it.

Her baby's birth, even more its death, had pulled her to her mother. When her child had suckled she had realized suddenly, fiercely, how her mother had loved her, realized what her own birth and babyhood had been to Pang Kee.

Pang Kee should eat rice.

Li Soo swore it to Kwan. Li Soo swore it by the great Purgatory-god—a terrible oath to break.

No goal in her mind, save only the South fields where rice grew, as soon as the blue-hooded, red cart was out of sight Li Soo had turned towards the South, walked slowly, steadily, never looking back, resting only when she knew that it was so she'd go farthest and soonest.

It was a thinning tramp. Her feet hurt. At night she was frightened. No salt, was her worst. There were wild berries to find, now and then a raw vegetable to steal at the edge of a farm-plot. Drink she had little: the wild berries had to serve. The day she found wild sorrel her need of salt was not so sore. But the sorrel was only one day's,

and the maddening craving for salt grew and grew until it racked her with nausea. Li Ho might have lured her back "home" with a lump of salt perhaps.

Was Pang Kee's craving for rice such torture as this? She shut her lips in a hard clinch. Pang Kee should have rice, she resolved with an added determination.

The pain in her crippled feet broke her down; she crouched in the dusty undergrowth and cried.

Sobbing, her tears ran to her lips—she gasped with relief. The tears were salt! She so gladly would have wept such tears for hours. She could shed no more.

For two tortured nights and a day she crouched there, in an untended field of wild poppies and low-growing, stunted oak trees, and rested. She had to.

Then she hobbled on; painful step by painful step; a very short way in a day.

But she would not give up.

She knew that she could not avoid human meetings much longer. She must find work, better food; food that would lessen hunger, work that could be done kneeling or squatting.

Pain conquered Li Soo. Desperate, she sat down again, beneath a camphor tree on the open path-side, too crippled to hide in the tall thick-growing grain that rippled invitingly only a short space away, and pulled the bandages from her feet.

How her feet stung!

This agony was worse than the other.

But it would pass. She took her feet, one after the other, in her hands, and rubbed her swollen, crippled toes. The agony was excruciating.

The girl's unbound feet hurt her more cruelly than at its worst the binded feet had done.

She staggered up, but she could not walk. She fell.

She waited.

She tried again. Again she failed.

For what did the Hell-god punish her so?

She must rebind her feet.

Li Soo restraightened, as well as she could, the burning bandages she had flung aside.

She could not rebind her feet! She could not stand on them—still less walk. Nor could she get her swelling, purpling toes back into place.

Kwan!

She moaned aloud, stricken, beaten.

And it was then that Shu A-fah found her.

After many days he had found a clue, and following it sleuthfully had been convinced that the lily-one of his lasting loyalty was in the cart of Ao Chi going to the city in which Ao Chi had his home.

That determined, it had not been hard to follow in the right direction. But it had been impossible to go at sufficient speed. He could not hope to overtake the stout-muled cart. He could not pay barrow-men, still less buy or hire mule or donkey. He had spent his hard-earned all on Ah Shee and on the several other briberies it had cost him to learn what he had learned, and patched together, about Li Soo. But, if he could not overtake her as she journeyed, he could reach her in Giant Cactus. No doubt she would stay there, at least for some time. Where else should she go? And there presumably she would have the friendliness of the Aos. Probably she had attached herself to their service, would be employed in Ao Chi's *chia*. It would be a long trudge to Giant Cactus City. Shu A-fah was accustomed to trudge far and long. Giant Cactus reached, it would not be difficult to find the house of Ao Chi. Probably there were many of the family name of Ao in Giant Cactus. But Ao was far less general a name than Li was. He knew which Ao he sought, knew all Ao Chi's names, Ao Chi's occupation, and that Ao Chi was a citizen of some importance. Shu A-fah had no fear that he could not find Ao Chi, scarcely more that he'd not find Li Soo in the girdle-service of Ao's wives.

Footsore and limping, but happier than he had been since he had suffered the blow of hearing of Pang Soo's marriage, Shu A-fah walked on and on towards Giant Cactus City.

One day he lost because a chance came to earn a trifle. Half a day was lost because fatigue overcame him. Hurrying on as soon as he could, in the dark a stone tripped him, lamed an ankle. Another day was lost.

On the sixth day Shu A-fah did an odd thing. He turned back! He retraced his way, for an hour, and then struck off at a sharp angle across a field of grain, because he had to; he was driven by an impulse stronger, more imperative, than his determination to find Li Soo in the *chia* of Ao Chi.

Last night he had dreamed that some augury had diverted his route, and that obeying, he had found Pang Soo, sobbing, needing him, crouched in misery beside a group of camphors.

He could not remember what the augury had been, or in which direction it had led him. He tried to remember. The harder he tried, the more his dream faded from his memory. Search as he would, he could not recall it.

But when the mated bluebirds flew above him he remembered. They would guide him! He turned and followed them. They flew swiftly. Shu A-fah ran. Presently he lost them. Without an instant's pause, with no iota of hesitation, he turned aside then, turned sharply to the right. He knew that doing it made his distance from Giant Cactus City greater, as, of course, his turning back already had. But he had to do it. The bluebirds no longer flew above him, but he knew that they compelled him still, and led him.

The girl he had loved without waver or flag, from the day he had given his rose to her baby hand, was sobbing bitterly when he suddenly saw her.

Shu A-fah ran to her swiftly—he felt no pain in his ankle. He knelt down and gathered her into his arms,

She snatched at his shoulder. She showed no surprise.

"Pang Soo, lily-one!"

"My feet!" she wailed, shuddering convulsively in the arms that held her. "My feet kill!"

Shu A-fah bent over them, and cried out.

Their unbound nakedness was an ugly purple. Li Soo's swollen ankles were pulsing like a tooth that festered and ached.

"Bind them! Bind them!"

Shu A-fah who always had obeyed her tried to obey her now.

She shrieked at the touch of his gentle fingers on her crippled toes.

But, "Bind them! Bind them!" she persisted.

He made the attempt, fumbling the bandage that her frenzied gesture showed him disordered on the ground.

Li Soo clenched her teeth in her lip—to endure. She did not know that her nails clinched on Shu A-fah's neck —nor did Shu A-fah.

One toe he desperately managed to replace. The girl's eyes were wild.

The next toe would not go back.

Never a surgeon was kinder, more careful. Never a surgeon was so futile.

Shu A-fah could not do the impossible thing Li Soo had commanded. Li Soo could endure no more.

"Let be!" she whimpered. "Kwan!" she sobbed in his arms.

Their tears ran: the man's and the girl's.

Shu A-fah rocked her in his arms.

He crooned to her, as he had in her babe days.

At sunset she slept, worn out by pain, soothed by his nearness.

When she woke the high moon was full, the stars sparkled from horizon to zenith. The hour-of-the-rat was light as the hour-of-the-horse: a white and silver night. Shu A-fah was nursing her still. He seemed not to have

stirred. But he must have moved a little, for her feet were cushioned on the coat he had slipped off and laid over his ankles, cushioning the poor wounded lilies so.

She gazed up at him dully.

Shu A-fah laid his face down on hers.

Several minutes passed.

"I famish." Li Soo spoke first.

Gently as a mother her ill babe Shu A-fah laid her down; so gently that no pain shot through her feet, so deftly that the cushioning coat did not slip from its place beneath them.

"I will be quick," he told her as he rose. "As quick as I can," he added as he left her.

It seemed a long time to Li Soo before he came back to her, although she dozed part of his absence away; lulled to such snatches of rest perhaps by knowing that she need not be alone again unless she chose. Shu A-fah would not forsake her. Shu A-fah would not betray her. He would feed, protect, serve her. Harm would not find her while she was with Shu A-fah. And he would obey her, as he always had.

Li Soo was both sorry and glad that he had come to her. She would find him useful. But it rasped her that he should know that she was in want, and know of her marriage failure. Presently she'd lie out of both those uncomfortable facts that so stung her pride and her vanity. She was too tired and hungry now, and her feet ached too much, to trouble to think out the most effective lie. But she would. Shu A-fah should not know.

In the meantime his help would be extremely useful.

She would trounce him sharply for being so long.

Shu A-fah was torn between his wish to get food, good and enough, for Li Soo, and his wish not to go far from her, not to leave her unprotected too long. He believed the lair he had left her in to be safe—and yet, *he* had found her there to protect and serve. Some other might find her there to molest and harm.

His heart beat high, because he had found Pang Soo, seen her, spoken with her, touched her. His heart sickened because he might be from her too long, and might have to go back to her without what she needed.

He had no money, not a coin. He could not buy, even if he could go far enough to find a shop, a house, or a roadside stall. But he could steal, and steal he should if but he might come to shop, house or stall. He thanked his gods for every theft that he ever had done, rejoiced that he was skilled in thieving.

But the most expert thief cannot steal nothing! Shu A-fah's heart sank as he thought of that.

But the gods are good. The gods of China are a peculiarly complacent lot, when they are not asleep or annoyed. Shu A-fah did not go back empty-handed to hungry Li Soo.

He found a wild peach tree, and filled a sleeve. He could empty it again, if he found better food. The peaches were small, scarcely ripe; splendidly better than nothing, but not half good enough for Pang Soo.

He journeyed on.

Little by little he found a few other things; none very good, none to be despised.

Suddenly one of the two godsends granted him as he foraged befell.

He saw the wall, the wall of his dream.

A long gray wall, tree-plumed, blue-inlaid. And the gate was open.

Shu A-fah hurried, very cautiously, through the gate.

Not a sound!

Neither man nor animal in sight!

The place was deserted, half in ruin. But the desolate place looked a garden of Eden to Shu A-fah.

He guessed at once what had happened.

The place was ill-lucked. A man, not too poor to move hurriedly, had built his dwelling on a spot displeasing to *fêng-shui*, had learned that he had, and had left as quickly

as he could; in his anxious flight leaving much behind him.

Grain and vegetables still grew, neglected, because neglected inferior, but they were food.

Shu A-fah gathered hastily, searched the house speedily.

He could not take all he wished. The sun sank, Pang Soo was alone and in need. And his strength to carry and to carry quickly had its limit. He took what he could.

He hurried back to Li Soo, glad that he was taking her what she could eat, grieved that it was not other: neither flesh, fish nor eggs.

Half-way back he met a woman, carrying a duck in one arm, a basket on her other arm.

Shu A-fah accosted the woman instantly. He scarcely took time to speak to her respectfully.

"I would have the duck," he told her abruptly.

The woman screamed.

"Be silent!" he hissed. "I am evil-eyed."

The woman ran.

Shu A-fah stopped her.

The woman began to whimper, but she was careful to whimper quietly.

Shu A-fah snatched the bird. It quacked, and took no care to quack quietly. Shu A-fah wrung its neck. The woman sobbed.

Shu A-fah pulled the cloth off from her basket.

Eggs!

The basket was small, but it was half-full of eggs.

"I regret to take them," Shu A-fah told the woman. It was true, for the woman was old. "My sister is ill, and she needs nourishment. Tell me your honorable name and where you live, and at some convenient time I may be able to pay you."

The trembling woman threw herself on the ground, too angry to speak, too frightened to protest.

"As it pleases you," Shu A-fah said sharply. "I will not tarry. You are a foolish one. Kwan will pay you. I give you thanks. But hear you this: if you speak to any

of me, of where we met, of how you lost your duck and your eggs, with my evil-eye will I find you and destroy you. I, the evil-of-eye have spoken."

The woman, prone on the ground, kicked in her rage. But she dared not protest. Shu A-fah believed that she would obey. He knew that she would not dare follow him.

He doubted if she had understood his words. He had threatened her in mandarin, the one dialect that in every Province many understood—many, but not all, and women less often than men. He had no doubt that she had understood his tone and gestures. He shrugged half-indifferently, half-respectfully, that dire need had forced him to do so ill by one so old.

He went on, as fast as he could. It was not easy to carry all he now had. He must not break an egg. He as nearly ran as he dared and could.

Li Soo should feast!

He wished that the woman had not been so old. He was glad that her clothes and her figure had told him that she was not desperately poor.

Li Soo berated him shrilly as soon as she saw him coming.

"Hush you!" he begged her softly, "lest any hear."

The girl frowned, but lowered her querulous voice.

Shu A-fah unloaded carefully, and spread before her all he had brought.

She sobbed when she saw the lump of salt. She snatched it and sucked at it before she took up the flask and drank of the wine all cold as it was.

Then when Shu A-fah had cracked three eggs, and she had swallowed them raw, she devoured the ripest mango—but more slowly—skin and all, while Shu A-fah contrived a fire of sticks and bark, struck his flints, and put the duck to roast.

Li Soo feasted indeed.

And Shu A-fah ate.

"Sleep," he said softly, when she could eat no more. "I

will watch. I have found us a *chia*. It is broken, deserted. But it will serve us for a time, serve until I can find a better. No one lives there. To-morrow I will carry you to it, and care for you there. You shall not walk again until your lilies are strong. You shall not want food again. Sleep well, fragrant-red-lily-one. I, Shu A-fah, will guard you."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

FOR three moons they lived together in the deserted *chia*—purely.

They left her insecure hiding-place as soon as she woke. Shu A-fah carried her all the way. It was the close of another day before he pointed out to her the long rose-clambered gray-and-blue wall.

Shu A-fah had had to rest almost as much as he had walked.

She had seemed feather-weight when he gathered the burden he loved up into his willing arms. His willingness, his ecstasy at holding her so, held. But his muscles tired, and finally rebelled. His back protested, and the arms that held her felt her heavier and heavier. His ankle winced more and more.

And Li Soo was not all that he carried. A bundle, cumbersome rather than heavy, was slung between his shoulders: all that they two had in the world knotted in the quilt he had brought from the house they were going to; all else he had brought from there that was not food, and such of the food as they had not eaten yet. They had left nothing behind them in the kaolin lair, not even the wee red shoes which were useless now. It seemed unlikely that Li Soo's swollen feet, bound or unbound, ever could be squeezed into those tiny lily-shoes again.

Long before noon—twice before noon—Shu A-fah lowered her gently to the ground, slipped off his bundle, and threw himself down beside her.

When he had rested only a little, he unknotted the quilt.

Li Soo ate a cold sweet potato—but it was not raw, and she had salt—a tomato and peaches, and drank a mouthful of wine. Shu A-fah warmed the flask in the sun. But he did not drink. Fruit—not too ripe—did for his thirst. The flask was not large; the wine must last Pang Soo until they reached the house.

There was a well there, and a bucket that would serve, Shu A-fah was glad to remember. She could drink all she would while they stayed there; knowing that she could, quenched his own present thirst.

"You cannot remember the first time that I carried you," he told her, resting beside her while she ate. "I can. You were a jade-like baby. I loved carrying you, and I was proud."

"You have carried me often," Li Soo said gently.

"And always have been greatly proud, always have loved carrying you, Pang Soo!"

"My honorable name is Li Soo," she said indignantly.

"Cast it off!" Shu A-fah exclaimed hotly. "Cast it off with the shackles from which you have slipped and escaped."

The girl's eyes blazed with fury.

"You are a dolt, Shu A-fah. And you are insolent. Dare say I have escaped! Dare think it!"

"What else?" Shu A-fah said meekly, but foolishly.

"Why should I, the wife of Li Ho, make explanation to you, peasant nameless-one?"

"There is no reason," he told her.

She finished her food in angry silence.

Shu A-fah filled the pipe, and offered it to her quietly.

Li Soo struck it out of his hand.

The man sat very quiet and waited. His infatuation had its wise moments.

"I had lost my way when you found me," she snapped at him—not very soon.

Shu A-fah had eyed the sun anxiously before she spoke.

"My lord adores me. I adore my lord. He had given me leave to visit a friend, the wife of his kinsman. I put on these peasant garments for a joke, to make laugh for us when I reached her courtyard. We laughed till it wearied us. I dismissed my women, and my palanquin, when we reached her gate. Sent them away while the gatekeeper ran to announce to Li O that I had come. The wife of Li Ho did not go unattended, or commit the rudeness of going on foot to visit another lady."

Shu A-fah picked up the fallen pipe, idly, very quietly. He was not looking at Li Soo. He had not looked in her face after she blazed out at him.

That she so lied to him, told him how sorely her pride was hurt that he had found her coarsely clad, and that he knew that she had fled from unhappiness. And Shu A-fah would have traded his soul to the Hell-god for power to comfort her, the power to spare her the shame that he knew she suffered.

"Li O would have sent servants back with me when I left her. I forbade her. I knew my way. I was minded to walk, and to walk alone. I purposed to meet Li Ho at the sycamore tree that covers the Gnats' Temple where Water-buffalo Lane reaches the Honeysuckle Hill. I knew that when my servants reached home without me, my lord would have hastened to meet me, frightened for my safety, longing for my nearness. I have teased him so before. It gnaws him. It is well for a lover to be anxious. It sweetens him. I knew how sweet our meeting would be at the sycamore tree. We often tryst there."

Shu A-fah studied the bowl of the pipe. Dashing it down, she had spilt all the tobacco. Shu A-fah refilled it slowly. He still did not look at Li Soo.

"I often go out alone, and always my husband follows me. *A-aie!* I tease him often. But he never is angered. He spoils me! Many times and again I have tried to anger him. I cannot!"

"You cannot anger a man who loves you—enough," Shu A-fah murmured gravely.

Li Soo shot him a glance of suspicion.

He met her eyes squarely. His face was grave and deferential.

Shu A-fah believed all she had told him!

Her face smoothed. And she continued her long, clumsy lie, her voice more friendly, no longer crackling with anger.

"I took a wrong turning. I cannot have remembered the way as exactly as I believed. I walked and I walked. My lilies began to ache."

Shu A-fah proffered the pipe again. She took it indifferently. When his flints struck sufficiently, she did not draw back or refuse when he bent over her and lit the tobacco.

"I was lost! I tried every direction. I cried out, called my lord. I grew frightened. I walked as long as I could. When I could not walk, I sat down and waited. I walked again. Once I crawled. I had walked many *li,* I think, when you found me." She broke off rather lamely, and handed the pipe to Shu A-fah with an imperious gesture. He took it, and when he had emptied and filled it, he gave it back to her, and lit it again.

His eyes were tender. He dropped them lest she see his pity in them.

Quick-witted Pang Soo! She had forgotten that not in a long moon could even a sturdy big-footed, accustomed to walk far, have walked from Li's *chia* to where he had found her.

"We should go," he suggested when she put down the pipe with a gesture that told that she did not wish to smoke more now.

"Let us go," she agreed.

Shu A-fah put the pipe in his sleeve, rebundled their lessened belongings, thrust his head through the quilt's knotted loop, picked Li Soo up from the ground, and went steadily on.

They did not speak again, until the next time they rested. Shu A-fah was husbanding his breath. Li Soo was thinking—and once she dozed.

When he put her down again, because he knew that he must rest, and because here a wilderness of harp-flowers grew pink among the ferns, she went on with her story at once.

"I never have driven them far or long since my feet were squeezed. I laughed and I laughed again to think how anxious Li Ho would be, and how, as I knew he was, he was searching for me. My mirth was great. But my lilies made me repent. They longed for my palanquin!"

She never had been in a palanquin in her life. Since the day that Li Ho had lifted her carelessly out of the cheap, coarse chair at his gate, and flung her over his shoulder as he would a sack of grain, Li Soo never had been carried in any sort of chair.

"At last I unbound them. I thought it would ease them. It tortured them more. I tried to re-press my lilies again. I could not. You must find a binder for me, Shu A-fah, a skilful binder who will place back my toes correctly. I would not have my lord see me a big-footed. It would grieve him."

"I will find a skilful binder, and bring her to you," Shu A-fah promised promptly.

"And a chair, that when my lilies once more are right I may go in haste back to my lord."

Shu A-fah made no reply.

"Unless," she added, "my dear lord finds me before the then."

At the deserted *chia* he made her such comfort as he could.

There were days that she stayed alone while he foraged farther afield, letting no one see him go or see his return, lest any one, watching him, find her hiding-place.

He always brought something back, sometimes a coin or two.

Often she sulked when he left her, often she upbraided him when he returned.

"I were more glad never to go," he told her. "Even when the cold moons come, I could make us enough comfort here to serve me. The *k'ang* is whole. I can mend the roof. I can coax the garden to yield. But you would lack much, perhaps pine. I must find and fetch. I must earn. To find and to earn, I must go. I like it not, fragrant lily-one."

She was glad of the soft warm shoes he brought her, roomy enough for her ailing feet. The day he gave her the jacket and trousers of silk she was almost gracious. The night he crept back at the hour-of-the-ox, and showed her a purse and its many coins she was kind.

"Wish you still to have your lilies bound again?" he asked.

"I think it so," she said.

"I must go to a *hisen*-city to get a sufficiently skilled binder, lily-one. One from a village might bungle and hurt."

"And opium. I must eat poppy before the binding!"

"You shall have all," he promised. "The nearest *hisen*-city is two days' journey for me on a donkey. I know where to steal a donkey. In the city will cost me a day or more. The journey back will be more slow, for the binder must ride, unless I can afford for her a chair and chairmen. Perhaps for six days, perhaps longer, I must leave you, Pang Soo."

Her lips quivered.

"Lily-one," Shu A-fah put his hand on her tattered sleeve, "shall we not go together? Will you give yourself to my love, flower-one? I will cherish you!"

Li Soo laughed softly. She had no doubt that Shu A-fah would cherish her.

But she said, "You forget."

"No! You have no will to go back to Li Ho the farmer. Nor will he come to seek you. His old number-one"—Li Soo flushed hotly—"will not allow him. He is rich, he could hire many searchers. He would have found and taken you before this, were it his wish, or dared he so cross Li Keen."

"How know you her name?"

Shu A-fah began at the beginning, and told her all. He welcomed the opportunity. He knew that there must be frankness between them before the future could be clear. He believed that the time for their frankness was ripe.

He told how he had traced her to the home of Li Ho.

Her hands trembled once—when he spoke of Pang Kee.

"The honorable old-one is well, lily-one," Shu A-fah said quickly. "She wants for nothing," he added softly.

Li Soo's face softened.

"I would not that she learns that I have left Li Ho's *chia*, Shu A-fah."

"She shall know it not from me," he promised.

Li Soo gave him a kinder glance than she had.

"Tell me of her, Shu A-fah."

All he could think to tell, he told her. But he did not tell of Pang Kee's again pleading to adopt him, his refusing it, or of their quarrel.

"Take my greeting to her, when you go back, Shu A-fah. Say to her that I am well. Say to her that I have all happiness, abundant salt, yellow wine, silk raiment."

Shu A-fah bowed his head.

"The melon-patch?"

"Is well dug. The vines are heavy with fruit. Green and yellow crowd each the others."

They were silent.

He told her of the day he had been in Li Keen's courtyard.

Li Soo chuckled.

He told of how Ah Shee had visited him at the tea-house, of the wine he had bought for Ah Shee there.

"I questioned her in many directions. I was sure that some person had aided you. At first she insisted that you had had no friend, not even an acquaintance, out of Li's *chia*. But I questioned and questioned again. I raked her memory as amber gatherers rake the seashore beach. At last she remembered that twice she had seen you chatting—as kind friends do—with San Bin the cat-cutter, who came to the farm to put his cats of wood among the young crops of Li Ho. It was enough. I did not need to hear more. If she came again to the wine-house, she did not find me there."

"You risked angering her; risking that, risked her reporting of you to Li Ho. It was much risk. Li Ho is powerful."

"She dared not."

"Why dared she not?"

"Own to him that she had gone to a tea-house to drink wine with a man?"

"An angry woman-one, a woman a man has slighted, does not count the cost."

"I know not women," Shu A-fah owned simply. "But I feel sureness that the girl Ah Shee would not speak to injure us as well as herself. She has a merry soul."

Li Soo sniffed. "I know women! I have lived in a courtyard of women."

"It matters not. She believed me old, blind, a seller of charms. I did not undeceive her. And he she believed me did not go from Jade Happiness City; I myself went from there. Three days I lingered in the City, to learn of San Bin. I learned that Ao Chi, a merchant from Giant Cactus City, his friend, had been visited by San Bin; to learn that was not difficult. To discover that on his home-going Ao Chi had halted his journey-cart near the house of San Bin and that San Bin had brought to the cart a woman-one, whom they had lifted into the cart, was more

difficult. But I learned it. Her height was your height. Then I sought San Bin. I made me his friend. It took time. I visited him in his hut. I bought from him a cat; and I greatly admired his cats."

"San Bin told you? I believe it not!"

"He told me nothing. I pressed him deftly. I pressed him hard. I drove him to corner. I offered him bribe. I threatened him with exposure to Li Ho. It is not small crime to shelter a run-away little-wife. I reminded him of it. All availed me nothing. The more I pressed him the more smoothly he lied. San Bin is a good man."

"A good man," Li Soo agreed gently.

"So I left him, and followed the way that I knew the cart of Ao Chi had taken."

"You did not overtake us?" She made no more pretense. Shu A-fah knew! She was not altogether sorry.

"Ao Chi had reached Giant Cactus before I left Jade Happiness, I make no doubt."

"Did you go to Giant Cactus? It is long distance."

"Half that distance only I went. Against my will, I turned aside. I was forced. I turned aside—and I found you."

"I am glad," Li Soo said quietly.

"I thank Kwan!" Shu A-fah said passionately.

"Shall we not go on together—now—for all time, Pang Soo? I lack words. I do not lack love. You know that I do not lack love. You long have known it. Will wed with me? I wedded you when you were a babe in my arms. You laughed at me across a red rose I gave you. My arms trembled about you as the arms of a bridegroom first alone with his red-veiled. I worshiped you then. I worship you now."

Li Soo frowned.

"I wedded you when you were a babe in my arms," he repeated. "I have had no other wife, Pang Soo, not once a handmaiden. Wandering alone for years, often not knowing where you were, or what it would cost to find

you, I have clung to you, kept me alone with you, even as a bridegroom who forgets all else but his happiness. Will you give me nothing in return? All my manhood clamors to you! My veins have throbbed for you. My blood has called to you. Life has ached."

Shu A-fah made to draw the girl closer.

She pushed him off, a little as if reluctantly.

She spoke, not unkindly. Bitterness grew in her voice with her words, but it was not bitterness to Shu A-fah.

He had touched her, if only for the moment. She was nearer loving Shu A-fah then than she ever had been. Or, if not that, nearer welcoming his love, nearer valuing it at its worth.

"Wed!" she said. "I cannot wed."

"Our hearts can marry," he urged pleadingly.

If he had pleaded less, commanded more, if he had snatched at her roughly, he might—perhaps—have taken her then, and, just possibly, might have held her.

But Shu A-fah had said truly that he did not know women.

There was tiger in Li Soo. Tiger, taming her, might have mated with her, and gladdened her loneliness.

Shu A-fah blundered on.

"Li will not follow you. If he does, he dies. For that I bought the knife I carry. Our spirits can wed. Where we will go none will know that we have not drunk the red-tied cup together. And when Li divorces you we can wed as the law of the gods likes best. He will divorce you, if he has not already. Li Keen will see to it. To divorce a secondary costs little. He need not repay a dower you never brought—"

Li Soo lashed out at him fiercely. She snarled cruel things at Shu A-fah. The irregularity of his suggestion did not shock her, scarcely impressed her. It neither interested nor attracted her. But that he knew she was but a "secondary," and a disregarded, unvalued one, stung her maddeningly. Her pride still was hot and strong.

Her vanity had not been killed. The peasant girl was neither moral nor immoral. She was cold to Shu A-fah. Life, since she had left her mother, had chilled her. And she always had taken Shu A-fah for granted.

She hurled words at him now that would have killed any love less persistent than his love for her.

He heard her in silence.

When she ended he made ready their evening meal.

When she had eaten he spread ready her rug and her pillow.

Li Soo ate heartily. She slept well.

Shu A-fah, rugless, pillowless, dozed near her. He got up now and then to feed the *k'ang*, once he re-covered her, bending over her with a kindled face that twitched painfully. His eyes were hungry eyes. But he only moved when the *k'ang* or her off-flung rug called him. And he made no sound, lest she wake.

CHAPTER XXXIX

AFTER that Li Soo no longer pretended that she wished to return to her husband, or that she would not be bitterly unwilling to be taken back to him.

Her anger against Shu A-fah did not last.

That he knew the truth had one advantage. She was able to say frankly what she wished to accomplish, to have him accomplish for her. And they were able to discuss the details of plans frankly.

She wished to have her feet rebound. She did not intend her future to be the life of a big-footed.

Shu A-fah promised her that he would accomplish it.

She wished to journey again without unnecessary delay.

They would.

She wished to journey towards the South; always the South. The rest was indifferent.

Shu A-fah promised that each *li* they went should bend to the South.

He did not ask why; nor did he suspect.

One night when they rested, a long way from the deserted house that had sheltered them so well, she told him, not because it was any concern of his, but because, being Chinese and a woman, she liked to chatter.

"I would see rice grow. I would see white rice—in fields and in market. It is in the Provinces south of China's Sorrow, the great Yellow River, that are the rice-fields. The best rice grows south-south. I asked San Bin much of rice. He has traveled. He has spoken with many travelers. San Bin is an educated man. He was able to answer me. From him I learned much about rice. I will go to the region of the rice."

"We will go to the rice," Shu A-fah said.

They went—very slowly.

They soon had no fear of being overtaken, scarcely any that she was searched for. But Shu A-fah had to earn as they went, whether his earning was honesty or theft. He did not care how he earned—for her. Li Soo cared as little. They adventured—that was all. And Shu A-fah strained his utmost that she should lie soft, eat well.

Shu A-fah walked, with a heavy pack on his back.

Li Soo rode in a wheelbarrow he pushed.

And if he jolted her, she berated him vixenishly.

Shu A-fah rarely jolted Pang Soo.

Among the things that the owner of the unluckily located house had left behind, when he fled with his family and his valuables, was an old broken barrow.

Shu A-fah mended it.

He made it an excellent barrow. He cushioned it well for Pang Soo. He padded her cushions with the feathers of molting wild birds, he covered the cushions with velvets and damask that the courtyard's women had left behind them.

To do those frightened women justice, they had not left many good garments behind them. But one stained and shabby curtain was softest velvet. A torn silk jacket was fine damask. There were trousers of delicate jade crêpe. The other man was wealthy. His women had left what seemed wealth to the two peasants.

Because of the barrow, and of the sack on his back, because his own ankle was not quite strong, and because Pang Soo's sensitive feet must not be jolted and tortured, Shu A-fah went slowly.

And there were days when Soo's feet throbbed badly, and she could not—or would not—stand the wheelbarrow's motion at all.

But they journeyed. Each day that they went, they went towards the south; going so, not because the colder moons gathered in on China, but because rice grew south of the turbulent Yellow River.

Shu A-fah was happy.

He starved for what he so craved. But he could wait—though the waiting tore him. He knew that he could work and earn enough for them both: the fine loaf for her, the coarse loaf for him, the rind for him, the fruit-flesh for her. There was no crime that would not be a sacrament if he did it for her. He was hers. He believed that some day she would be his.

Probably no strong soul ever desires anything as greatly as Shu A-fah desired Pang Soo, without believing that before patience's end it will be won.

But he did not woo her again—except by the soft, slow, drip-drip of his ceaseless serving and yielding.

Shu A-fah was couthless, his mind was, for a Chinese, third- or fourth-rate. But he was a great lover.

Sometimes great love is balked, but more often it wins through.

True love is a genius. This Chinese peasant loved truly.

Sometimes they went by day, sometimes by night.

But except when the wind blew from behind them, blew strong and steadily, at the right angle, the speed Shu A-fah made was small. When the wind was up and right he went faster. For then he ran up the high, square mat-sail that he had fashioned little by little, as he sat listening to Pang Soo, or sitting beside her at the glow of the *k'ang* while she slept. Shu A-fah did not often idle.

Half the wheelbarrows in China have such sails. A well made sail, well put on, well run up, does half the barrow-coolie's work for him. When it is useless, it is worse than useless, for it is not light, and when furled it must be carried. Every ounce tells on the barrow's weighted freight.

At the *fu* City of Perfect Politeness her feet were bound —slowly, skilfully. It was less painful than Li Soo had feared. The binder was an artist-manipulator. It cost Shu A-fah more than a long moon's good earning. Shu A-fah did not grudge it. The poppy he fed the girl's pipe was expensive poppy. But he found a way to help himself to it without payment.

Shu A-fah grudged parting with any coin avoidably. Every coin saved was a coin to spend for Pang Soo. He was a glutton for her, a glutton for work. He was a miser for her, a miser of coins.

It was not an unpleasant jaunting. As they moved farther south, farther and farther from the courtyard of Li Keen, the girl's moods grew sunnier, more often sunny. Sometimes she sang as they went. Passers-by often smiled at the picture: a muscular, happy-faced man, bending to the wheelbarrow he pushed so steadily, his eyes bright and careful on the road, soft and warm on the girl who sat among gay cushions, wild flowers in her hair, wild flowers in her coat, wild flowers glowing on the silken lap.

Birds made them music; birds and wind in the trees, water that rippled, soft rain that fell softly now and then. But Shu A-fah knew that she mourned her tiny *kin* and

her lap-harp that Li Keen had broken and burned. He had sold the *kin* he had played in Li Keen's courtyard, and he had lost his flute as he journeyed to Shensi.

But in the first walled city they reached Shu A-fah got her a *kin* and got himself a flute—not from a shop.

After that, often when they rested, sweet Chinese music stringed and fluted through the bamboos, pulsing fondly to the starlight. And little beryl-colored crickets heard, liked it, and joined in.

When the crickets did, Soo laughed, and threw them crumbs.

CHAPTER XL

IT was a sexless honeymoon.

Often Shu A-fah's senses ached. His self-control never broke.

He worked. Li Soo lazed.

But she was not thoughtless. The seemingly insouciant girl was thinking hard.

Happy as he was, contented as she was, in this picnic present, they both were concerned for the future. And both were planning it. Their two plans differed.

Shu A-fah planned their futures as one: a life together, cushioned for her by his industry, a future in which they often went together where spaces were wide—cool, gentle winds perfumed by flowers, yellow path tree-shaded, running waters, still, clear pools, birds awing or in song, rest by the wayside, they nestling together, distant bells, starlight, silence. . . .

Li Soo planned her future: independent, successful. It did not include Shu A-fah. She made no plan for Shu A-fah. She did not give his future a thought. She accepted his present companionship and care and his permanent devotion as she always had accepted them, as she accepted the blue of the sky, the savor of salt, the comfort

and convenience of fire. It was not her fault that she did; it was Shu A-fah's fault. He had trained and taught her to; she had been an apt pupil, she had learned the easy, agreeable lesson quickly and well.

Whether they lived life out side by side, as he stubbornly planned, or parted soon, as she placidly planned, while their lives touched, Li Soo always would be master, Shu A-fah obedient.

The girl had a soft "baby-face," the type of face that does not grow old as soon as "stronger" faces do. It masked and denied a character of steel, as such faces do oddly often.

She was pressing south in a spirit of adventure, and because she knew that the rare journeys Li Ho made always went north and east. He had friends and interests in Chihli. His mother had been a Tientsin woman.

If she came upon rice conveniently, she'd think of Pang Kee, get her a bowlful perhaps, if she conveniently could.

She thought of Pang Kee less often than she had. She thought kindly, rather than tenderly. Pang Kee had been good to her; Li Soo remembered it. She'd be glad to throw a comfort and a gratification to Pang Kee, if she could.

She thought oftener of the baby she had borne. She thought of it tenderly. Often she thought of it longingly. But she no longer regretted its death; she scarcely had at the time. For she believed that its life must have been hard. She never would have forsaken it. She had loved it. She loved it still. Had it lived, Li Soo would have stayed on at Li's farm, shielding her child as much as she could, playing her every card to win Li Ho. She knew that she held several good cards for gaming with him. She would not have risked escaping with the child in her arms; would not have faced the risks and hardships for it. She longed for it often, but she was glad it had died.

Its birth had cost her pain. Its brief life had brought her discredit and thongs.

If she again bore a child, its birth should be worth while,

worth pain even, and its life should pay her well, shackle a man indulgent as well as rich.

Li Soo's ambition was hard, cold, calculating, relentlessly for self. She felt that Li Ho and his harpy number-one had robbed her. She intended to recover all that had been stolen from her. She intended the future to repay her with usurious interest.

She did not dislike Shu A-fah—far from it! She did not dislike his companionship. It had been pleasant there in the deserted home-place that he cushioned for her with comfort. It was pleasant here, riding through the sunshine, tended and indulged. Sometimes his devotion touched her, sometimes it amused her. After her slavery and nothingness in the house of Li Keen, it pleased and soothed her, rehabilitated her, to queen it here over Shu A-fah. But it was not enough. She wished a larger kingdom.

She knew her handicaps. She knew which of them were unalterable, and which she might destroy or modify. She knew her assets. Being a woman, she somewhat exaggerated them.

She planned.

Often when she sat at ease on the cushioned wheelbarrow, a half smile on her childlike mouth, her eyes lazy but observant on all they passed as Shu A-fah trundled sweatingly on, she was considering how she would bring about what she meant to accomplish, and to accomplish with the least possible work or strain. What it might cost others was their concern, not hers. She was keenly concerned that it should not cost her too much or too disagreeably.

Lost in her own thoughts, she paid scant attention to much that Shu A-fah did and said. Pleased with her own intention, she was silkenly careless of him, carelessly tolerant, indifferent. And Shu A-fah misunderstood—and his faithful heart sang while his tired body toiled.

She knew what Shu A-fah wished. Even a stupid girl must have known.

They were equally determined to prevail, splendidly matched in strong will, unequal in most else.

Shu A-fah was determined that, come what might, they should not part again.

Li Soo had determined that they should. She did not underrate his usefulness to her now. She foresaw him a future handicap. Li Soo was done with handicaps. She believed that she'd go swifter and surer alone presently. She would seize opportunity when it came. She'd go to it, if it did not come to her.

It was a struggle between them—though Shu A-fah did not suspect that it was, and clear-headed Li Soo did not realize fully how strong a fight he would put up, if he had to fight.

When the time came, she'd like best to thank him and dismiss him. But she'd not dismiss him. She knew he would struggle against his dismissal. She would avoid that small bother.

She would give Shu A-fah the slip, when she was ready to do without him.

It was a struggle between two strong wills, a struggle between a man's soul and a girl's mind.

Hers was the superior mind. Li Soo had little of Chinese simplicity.

Shu A-fah was the greater, finer soul. But he was simple, straight as a die, unsuspicious. He was intelligent, but he was without guile.

These were the two great differences between them: he unselfish, she selfish; his simplicity, her subtility.

Shu A-fah was truer to Chinese type.

Simplicity is the outstanding quality of the Chinese. "Childlike and bland" is a cheap sneer that is seriously high praise. Indefatigable, industrious, honest, incapable of ingratitude, lovers of Nature, reverent to learning, ap-

preciative of art, courteous, peaceful, patient, kind—fine qualities of a splendid people—above all else is their simplicity; never stupid, simple in the most creditable sense.

Simplicity is the one hall-mark of all truly great art. Perhaps it is their great, innate simplicity that makes the Chinese so close in Nature's fellowship, makes them so often supreme artists.

But, too, it has made them internationally gullible. In part—not only it—it has been the fine simplicity of China that has enabled others so often and so deeply to wrong China, trick her into abominable, unfair treaties, charge her interest that would blush the cheek of any money-lender in London, force opium upon her.

Sometimes it is written that simplicity shall win in the end.

Shu A-fah was no match for Li Soo—now.

Perhaps he might win in the end.

She played with the flowers he brought her, sat soft on her cushions, and thought.

He pushed and sweated, served her, loved her, waited and hoped.

Their way was long.

CHAPTER XLI

THERE were days when they met no one as they journeyed on. Shu A-fah liked those days best.

Pang Soo, little flower faces smiling up by the wayside, wind in the bamboos, soft clouds, beautiful tints in a blue-blue sky, bird songs, nights of utter silence, he liked best; these were home and sweetness to him.

Li Soo was glad when they passed others, heard other voices. She liked to look and to guess. Human panorama made much of her love of life. She loved life intensely.

The days that they skirted a city wall, caught the hum and movement of city life, better still when they threaded

city streets, lingered in the city for a time, were the days she liked best.

She loved flowers. She liked to wear them even more than she liked to see them growing. She enjoyed some human pageant—a fair in full flair, a rich man's balcony illuminated by lamps of many colors, a procession of marriage or funeral, a puppet-show, stilt-dancers, a temple-festival—more than she enjoyed the pageant of the sunset sky.

The day they reached the canal she laughed and clapped her hands.

"Put down the handles, make the wheel fast!" she ordered. "I would watch."

Shu A-fah obeyed.

He was glad to rest. A leg a wasp had stung was sore. Feet and back, he was weary. They had come far since dawn, and it was the hour-of-the-monkey now.

And, too, it interested him to see the brave sights on bank and on the boat-thronged water. He loved the free, wild places, but he was no recluse. And always there was more scope for industry, honest or not, where people crowded and jostled most thickly.

The rest of to-day and to-night he would not work. To-morrow, when he had found safe and comfortable bestowal for Pang Soo, he would earn—or find.

He squatted beside the barrow, and watched with eyes as interested as the girl's the life on the canal, the life on the bank.

Nomad Shu A-fah had seen many such scenes before. It was new to Li Soo. He watched it all with quiet interest. Li Soo's interest quivered. It intoxicated her. They would stay here a long time, she resolved.

Shu A-fah lit a pipe; the girl would not smoke; she wished only to look. There was much for hut-born Li Soo to see: moving, changing human pictures; types and costumes and many things that she never had seen before; busy human beings clotted on the bank, boats and boat-life

clotted on the water; blue predominant on the crowded bank, tawny browns predominant on the crowded water; bank and canal a throbbing panorama of pulsing Chinese industry.

They sat so for some time, as long as it takes a small short candle to burn away. Then, turning close to the barrow, that it should screen him, Shu A-fah drew some coins out of his loin-cloth, and counted them.

It was well! A room in a cheap inn would not cost too much. And before they sought it they could afford a hot and savory meal. It was very well.

"I hear a food-seller's bell. He is not far. I will go to him and bring him here."

She gestured assent.

A man and a woman and a little child, playing happily with a broken kite, sat on the bank a few feet away. Shu A-fah went to them.

"Venerable sir," he said, "my sister famishes"—the old woman frowned—"we have journeyed far to-day. I would go to the food-seller I hear—he is near—and bid him come to her that she may choose. Of your great politeness will you permit me that I push nearer our wheelbarrow, that she may have the jade protection of your eminent closeness? I shall be but a very short time-space gone."

The old man looked at his wife. She smiled. She had frowned, believing that the stranger was going to ask a dole. If he purposed buying food, he had coin. She was not unwilling to do a small service that would cost nothing. The stranger had an amiable face. He might buy a sweetmeat for the grandchild. She smiled.

"With much willingness," the old man said.

Shu A-fah thanked him profusely, went back to Li Soo, pushed the wheelbarrow close to the three, and hurried off towards the still ringing bell.

"Dwell you here?" the woman asked, pointing to the City's distant wall.

Li Soo was delighted to gossip.

She chose her words carefully, not knowing what, if any, statement Shu A-fah had made to them.

"We may conclude to do so," she said, "if my brother finds there a business he seeks. That is a fine boat."

A crowded passenger boat was mooring against the landing-place.

"It is wealth to own such boats," the woman said. "It goes between here and Red Cow City. It costs a dollar to go on it all the way—a coolie passage. A rich man who goes first class pays ten dollars."

"A great sum!" Li Soo exclaimed respectfully.

"A very great sum," the man agreed.

"Do rich persons often journey on this boat, may I entreat you tell me, distinguished and very old sir?"

"It occurs," the man replied briefly.

"To-morrow at the hour-of-the-snake," his wife volunteered, "the boat goes back again to Red Cow. A very rich family journeys on it then. Pien Shê and his wife and their retinue. Pien Shê is exceedingly rich. His wife is young and silly. He adores her—old men are so!" She gave her husband an ugly look. He received it with a foolish giggle.

"The wife of Pien Shê has many-many jewels, more robes than she can wear. He denies her nothing. I talked to-day with a serving-woman who came to the market to buy a cage-bird her mistress fancied. It was an extravagant purchase. The servant scarcely bargained. Sun Tu, the bird-seller, demanded twenty *yuan* for the bird and its cage. She gave him four of the five parts of what he asked. I cried out my surprise. She laughed and told me that her master would not reproach her for paying three-four times true value, but that he would punish her if she tarried, kept her mistress waiting. He had kept a useless, greedy boy in his service for months only because the boy played well the *kin*. It is his young wife's favorite musical instrument. She is a music-mad one, music sick. The boy ran away a moon ago. The wife wept with her anger. When they

reach again their *chia,* he will send to the far-near city—a much distance—to find a *kin*-player for her. Whatever much it cost, he will get for her the thing she asks."

A sharp glint flashed in Li Soo's eyes. But she asked no more questions. She listened politely; that was all.

The older woman told much more. It might have been true.

Shu A-fah was not long, but he was longer than he had promised.

He apologized profusely, thanked them as profusely.

The food-seller trundled his itinerant food-shop close behind Shu A-fah.

Shu A-fah offered a black-spotted, yellow clay tiger to the grandchild, and a small pot of ginger-paste to the grandmother. They were accepted graciously. And for the few pipefuls of super-tobacco that Shu had brought the old man, the graybeard returned long and elegant thanks.

His debt to them paid, Shu A-fah thanked them again, picked up the wheelbarrow's handles and pulled it away.

The food-seller had secured a good customer. Shu A-fah took the best for Li Soo, and bought a good deal for himself: bowls of steaming vermicelli, spicy sugared puff-balls, a dish of raw fish, an apple-dumpling rich with peanuts.

There was no haggling. The roadside prices of such food are fixed and well known.

The restaurateur was mannerly. He moved a few paces away, but he kept a gentle eye on the wheelbarrow, and appealed with his bell for more and still more customers. He would come back for his basins and spoons when he saw that the man and the girl had finished their meal. It would be when they had eaten the last atom of all Shu A-fah had bought. Chinese who buy at the wayside never are wasteful of food. Sometimes they praise it, complimenting the vendor upon its excellence, occasionally they criticize it acrimoniously, telling the seller frankly what

they think of it and of him, but always they eat it—all of it.

The vermicelli was good, the dumplings were delicious. They were hungry. They devoured in contented silence. Shu A-fah finished first. Hungry as she was, the hot, savory meal had but half Li Soo's attention. There was so much to see here! So much she never had seen before! It thrilled her.

Shu A-fah had to urge and beg her again and again before the intrigued girl would consent to leave the canal, that they might find such shelter-place as they could before night.

The inn was not clean. It was noisy. No smiling welcome greeted them here! A room that was little more than a hole in the wall was given them grudgingly after Shu A-fah, for once too weary to bargain effectively, had paid the price the innkeeper demanded.

But Shu A-fah was not too weary to do all that was possible for Li Soo's comfort.

He made her a bed of their softest belongings.

When he could find no more to contrive for her comfort, he threw himself down across the door.

Shu A-fah yawned, stretched once, and slept.

Li Soo was wide awake. She had ridden far to-day, but she had not walked, she had carried no load, she had not pushed a wheelbarrow.

And she was too excited to sleep, and too intent on a thought that had filmed a few hours ago while the older woman had gossiped.

Li Soo drew her *kin* from the barrow. She tuned it, and began to play.

Li Soo was practicing—carefully.

It did not wake Shu A-fah. Probably no one heard her. In the noise of the inn-yard, where coolies diced and chattered, mules brayed, and travelers came and went all night long, the steady tinkle of music was no more an insistent

sound than the tinkle of soft distant raindrops is in a great thunderstorm.

Until dawn came Li Soo practiced on her tiny *kin,* practiced anxiously and with greatest care. She did not hear the constant noise of the yard.

CHAPTER XLII

SHU A-FAH was reluctant to leave Li Soo alone at the inn. But the innkeeper's wife seemed both respectable and kind. "I will sit by her and sew. My shoes wear, your warmer coat needs a patch," the girl urged. And she urged that he must go by himself to look for work. He could not go from house to house with her in the wheelbarrow. The barrow needed greasing and a new belt on its wheel. It creaked like a devil's throat. They had seen last night how narrow many of the streets were, how many of the streets and lanes went up and down deep stairs. She could not walk beside him, again her lilies ached. The sooner he went, the sooner he'd return to her.

Shu A-fah yielded. She had spoken true-words.

She would not leave the inn?

Li Soo promised.

The innkeeper's wife promised too, when Shu took a whispered word with her.

He went reluctantly, but he went.

It proved a long trudge. The inn lamps had been lit and smoking an hour when he came to it again.

He came blithely.

After a score of discouragements he had found work. To-morrow when his work-day was done he would search a more suitable lodging for the lily-one, a permanent lodging for them both—permanent as long as she was as pleased with this city as she had been yesterday. To-night they'd make merry. He still had three coins left. And he had a

flower in his hand, a flower for her coat, and in his other hand he clutched firmly the long yellow legs of a slaughtered fowl. They'd sup well to-night.

He hoped that she had not wearied herself sewing. He could have patched his coat—its stuff was harsh for such sweet, tender fingers to handle. Had it rasped her delicate skin? But it would be pleasant to wear the garment she had patched. He would value that old so-honored coat. It was sweet kindness of the fragrant lily-one.

He hurried on, a smile on his lips, a glad light in his eyes.

At the hour-of-the-dragon, when Shu A-fah left the inn, Li Soo told the innkeeper's wife that she would rest on the comfortable *k'ang*, sleep perhaps; she had not slept much through the night, the little she had slept had not been rest, dreams had troubled it. She was very weary, they had journeyed far. She yawned and lay down.

"Disturb me not, and let me not disturb you," she begged. "Even now sleep seeks me. I believe I shall sleep while three large candles burn"—six hours—"sleep till he comes again."

The woman grunted content, and hurried off to her many tasks. She heard her husband call; he was not accustomed to being kept waiting by her. She hastened to do his bidding, and forgot Li Soo.

Li Soo jumped up, gathered her own belongings together, pulled her *kin* out of the barrow again, and crept stealthily out of the inn. And when she had gained the lane, if her golden-lilies ached, Li Soo did not heed or spare them.

She reached the canal's landing-place just as the sky showed that the hour-of-the-snake was near.

Li Soo had taken sharp notice last night of the way Shu A-fah had gone when they left the canal. But it had been tortuous. More than once she had had to ask her way. Twice she could not make the woman she questioned understand her. But she spoke some mandarin, and it served with the others to whom she spoke.

Once she stopped at a mean cloth-stall, and haggled for a long strip of colorless stuff.

In a quieter lane she bound it about her head, long unhemmed ends hanging down to either ankle.

The landing-place was pandemonium.

But when two neatly clad men-servants carrying pliant rods, pushed into the crowd, crying loudly, "Make way! Make way for a distinguished traveler," the dense crowd gave way meekly.

At the gangway, a tall, scholarly-looking, silk-clad man left his chair, and drew back the silk curtains of a four-bearers palanquin.

The girl he helped out was lightly veiled, jeweled, splendidly dressed. Her jeweled shoes were tiny. Her stickpins sparkled and clattered. Serving-women scrambled out from their plainer chairs, and followed their mistress closely. A blue-clad boy followed with them. He carried a tiny bird in a gilded cage. A number of serving-men—a crest on their shoulders—came after the bird-cage boy.

Li Soo followed them.

On the boat's crowded deck it was not difficult to lose herself in the excited, shrill chattering *mêlée*.

A Chinese boat does not start promptly or directly. But at last the boat started.

Li Soo did not look back.

She squatted on the deck, behind a screening crate, and nursed her *kin*.

It was dark when a woman slipped into the lady's cabin.

A serving-woman screamed.

"Go from us, vermin!" another said angrily.

The girl on the cushioned stool gestured them to be silent.

"Who are you? What seek you?" she demanded.

Li Soo bent to the lady's tiny feet.

"I am your beggar-one, O princess-one! Hear me some

short words, I thy worm-one entreat. Kwan move you that you grant me to speak."

"You are speaking."

"Gracious one, unless you grant me your perfumed protection, ruin will grip me."

The lady smiled coldly her incredulity.

"This thy worm is but a poor maker of music."

The lady's painted mouth unstiffened a little.

"My *kin* and I are alone in all the earth's great squareness."

The other's eyes kindled. "*Kin*" had interested her.

Li Soo saw her advantage—and took it.

She told her story, improvising carefully as she spoke. It was not a true story. But truth edged it now and then. Her slow entreating voice broke—not too often; tears came—not offensively, not interruptingly. It was a piteous story, in no way discreditable to her who told it.

Li Soo was an actress lost to China! And yet, women have many needs to play-act. Daily life is their theater.

It was a touching story; skilfully thought out, beautifully told. Even the serving-women were interested; their mistress was deeply moved.

It ended with an exquisite sigh of patient resignation.

"The honorable master!" one of the serving-women cried out in alarm.

The grave-faced man, in the quiet robe of dull purple silk, had been standing there for some moments, at the cabin's door he had slid open quietly—watching and listening.

The jeweled girl was not alarmed. Her pretty painted lips smiled a confident welcome. She did not rise from her cushioned seat!

And Li Soo knew who *was* master—and was glad.

"You have found amusement to your liking, jade-one of all flowers!" The man's plain, grave face lit with beauty when he smiled at his wife.

"Much-much to thy indulged wife's liking, my much-kind husband. I covet her."

"Covet her, blossom?"

"I would have her. I would keep her my own make-music. Give her to me!"

"She is not mine, yellow rosebud. How then can I give her to you?"

"That you can do!" Pien Lou insisted.

The serving-women exchanged a quick glance. They looked at Li Soo jealously. Another favorite! To queen it over them! And such a favorite! An inferior no-one!

They knew how it would go.

Pien Lou hurled Li Soo's story at the husband—its outlines.

"Forsaken! Penniless! Thrown off the boat, beaten perhaps! Not since you protect, pigeon's beautiful egg! So See!"

One of the servant-women turned to him.

"Find Sun Li. Bid him he buy the girl a ticket."

"A first-class ticket," the young wife added.

Pien Shê lifted his handsome eyebrows. He was a very plain man with several handsome points.

"A first-class ticket," he laughed, "since your mistress commands it."

So See threw So Wên—they were sisters—a cautious glance, and went.

Pien Shê sat down beside his wife. He fingered the toys that hung at her tasseled girdle, and played with them gently, as if he liked to touch what was hers.

"She shall bide with us a short time, since it pleases you, dearly-loved-one," he said. "But I myself must question her presently. She may be an outcast, unfit to near your fragrant presence. And, of a truth, my rosebud whom I cherish, her music-skill is a littleness. I listened to her but now when she played for you. I can with no difficulty find one much more adequate to replace He Lin, and to serve you with music."

Pien Lou pouted. "She is weary and ill," she protested, "and out of her best playing. She requires but practice, and suppleness will return to her fingers. She needs rest. She needs kindness. She needs food. When she has those, her playing of her *kin* will be excellent. *I* like her playing! I would keep her. And a girl maker-of-music will be in many ways more convenient than a boy or man-one."

Pien Shê laughed.

"So Wên! Take the strange-one, and get rice for her—in abundance. Your mistress has spoken."

The servant bowed, motioned Li Soo to follow her; and they went out together.

Pien Shê laughed again, gathering his wife's hands into his. He was glad to be alone with her. And he agreed with her that a music-servant, apt to be summoned to her at all hours and in all places, might more conveniently be of his young wife's own sex.

He would question the stranger shrewdly before he consented too far. But he knew that probably the girl would stay in Pien Lou's retinue as long as Pien Lou chose.

He drew his girl-wife into his arms, and forgot all else.

Li Soo smiled as she ate. How long would it take Shu A-fah to find her? she wondered.

She had little doubt that he would find her. She wished that he might not. Attached to the service of this rich and pampered wife-one, Li Soo believed that she could carve for herself life more to her liking than any that she and he might find together.

He had befriended her well; always would she remember it. And when she was rich and powerful she would reward him, if they chanced to meet. Until then she'd choose to keep many *li* between them. She needed him no longer. And his presence would hamper her. And it would remind her of what now it was her anxious wish to forget: her defeat and misery in the house of Li Ho.

When she'd finished eating, she watched her chance to

slip away from the girl So Wên. She wished to be alone; to chew the sweet cud of her freedom; to gloat over her present great good fortune; to dream; to plan how best she could turn the favor of the rich man's wife to her own great advantage.

So Wên shrugged indifferently when she missed the other. Pien Shê had commanded her to get food for the brazen-one, he had given no order that So Wên should see the creature installed on a first-class sleep-mat. It would be no fault of So Wên's if the *kin*-girl fell overboard.

But that was no part of Li Soo's golden plans.

She lay on deck, in a hidden corner: numb to what Shu A-fah was suffering; quick to her own ambitious scheming; laved in dreams and vanity, laved and happy in the thousand beauties of the boat's moonlit journey.

The bestarred firmament was regal.

The long marble bridge was reflected in the glasslike water.

A temple looked silver in the brilliant midnight.

Honied music came from a festival-keeping village.

Li Soo was happy, content, confident.

Presently Li Soo slept. And twice her face dimpled with the sweetness of her dreaming.

In Shantung Pang Kee moaned in her sleep.

In the City, in which she had left him distracted, Shu A-fah hunted madly, blindly.

He had no thought that she had been taken from him, or that accident had befallen her.

Shu A-fah had no illusions about the girl whom—babe, child, woman—he had garnered in his very soul; and whom he always would. He knew that she had gone. He sensed why. She had left him because she wished to.

He did not blame her.

Shu A-fah never had blamed Pang Soo.

He never would.

But he would find her.

It did not occur to him that he might not find her; it scarcely occurred to Li Soo, now or after.

He would find her. He would find her if it cost him to pull down brick-by-brick the Wall of China!

Not once did his faithful heart reproach her.

He blamed himself. His the fault; his should be the reparation. He had not served her well enough. He had tended and sheltered her too roughly. He must acquire money, that his perfect lily might have softer, richer placement. He must learn more, acquire finer manners, that the queen-one should have less cause to shrink from him.

He would win her to his long longing. Shu A-fah the coolie swore a mighty oath.

Did Kwan record it?

Which way had she gone? Where was she hiding?

Shu A-fah had no idea.

He had no plan of how he'd search.

He would follow; he would find; he would woo again and win.

But of the route he'd take he foresaw not an inch. The greatness of his love blinded him, made it impossible for him to reason—yet; as the birds, strong and persistent beyond all others, that reach and fly over the summit of Everest go forever blind.

But he knew that he should find her. And when he had found her—soon or long—he would serve her while they lived.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE stay she made in the house of Pien Shê was the turning-point in Li Soo's life.

This was a new world to her. It appealed to her as nothing had before. It quickened her, and it gave form and direction to her, until now a little pointless, ambition.

She knew that this was so.

She saw a finer side of homelife than she ever had heard of or visioned.

Superfluities, ornament heaped on ornament, she had believed to be the aim and stamp of wealth: rooms crammed with costly, striking things; jewels added to jewels; flowers in masses; gardens theatrically adorned; hordes of servants —glitter, show, tables groaning under twenty foods, constant bustle, everything sumptuous, everything elaborate.

It was not so here.

Pien Shê's wealth was indubitable, but it flowed through the stately place quietly, never flaunted, a cool refreshment. Pien Lou gave a beggar-boy a gold-piece one day—the child's face had pleased her—but for the most her dress was nun-simple and she wore it simply: softly colored robes, of costly, quiet material.

It was a place of peace and quiet. Even the girl-wife, about whom the great place pivoted, laughed softly.

In the house, as in the courtyards and in the far-stretching gardens, there was a sense of space.

How Shu A-fah would have liked it!

She liked it—surprised that she did.

When she had found fortune, something such should be her own *chia*.

For a moon the girl-wife indulged the new *kin*-girl, gave her silks and beads, praised her slight and peculiarly faulty music. And because the mistress did, the servants dared not slight or neglect the new woman.

Li Soo was happier than she had been since before her baby feet were bound. She basked delightedly in the lady's favor; quick to obey, watchful and anxious to please.

And she was careful to give no offense to the serving-women, who, she knew, disliked her. She saw that among themselves they often laughed at her. She wondered why.

Then, suddenly as she had adopted her, Pien Lou wearied of Li Soo, discovered that Li Soo was an inferior maker of inferior music, ceased to send for her.

The capricious girl was not unkind to her discarded toy. She forgot about her.

The jealous others vented spleen upon the stranger then, the little that they dared.

They were not afraid that Pien Lou would notice and rebuke. They were afraid of Pien Shê. They knew that his eye was everywhere, and knew that he instantly would punish injustice or discourtesy.

Li Soo's vanity was wounded. But she would hold her footing here as long as she could. Pien Lou no longer lavished extravagant largess on her. But Pien Shê bade the house-steward pay the "new one" well and regularly. She was rasped and humiliated by the lady's changed attitude, bitterly hurt by her own loss of face. But, even so, this was heaven compared to the hell of Li's farmstead; and it was great luxury compared to the most comfort she ever before had known.

She filled her time with work—for herself. She set herself to learn, picking up every useful hint she could, watching deportment and practicing her poor music zealously. She had escaped from Li Ho, she had escaped from Shu A-fah; she had no wish to escape from here. If she had, there was nothing to detain her.

She was not confined to the *chia*. She was free to go abroad when she would, as she would. And more than once the master, pitying her aloneness, himself sent her into Red Cow on an errand.

The first time she went in a servant-chair. Afterwards she often went on foot; sent on errand or message, or of her own accord.

She found much to see, much to learn in Red Cow City.

She did not often think of Shu A-fah. When she did, she smiled a little impatiently. Shu A-fah, blunderer that he was, had not played his cards well.

She thought of Pang Kee oftener, but not often. When she did, Li Soo's eyes grew sad.

For the most the *chia,* Red Cow City, the busy weavings of her own ambitious mind, and her future that she dreamed and planned, engrossed her.

CHAPTER XLIV

PIEN SHE dismissed Li Soo with a coin-wallet that was apologetically heavy. Since Pien Lou had decreed, "Send her away," he did not hesitate to do so. And he reflected that the girl was better off than when she had so successfully forced herself upon them. But he chose to deal generously with the girl against whom his wife had no graver complaint than an impatient, "I am wearied of her."

Li Soo smarted. But she went at once. There was nothing else to do. And she went quietly—too wise and too proud to turn at the gate and scream and revile hysterically: the immemorial right of every Chinese servant who is discharged.

Li Soo went unwillingly. She had not meant to go so soon. The colder moons were coming. She had wished to stay here until flower-time came again, and until she had found the chance, for which she had not failed to watch in Red Cow, to attach herself to service as good or better than her serving there; if possible with a new mistress about to journey.

The spirit of adventure was with Li Soo, and she craved to see more of life, she craved to *live.*

She had heard and overheard a good deal in the Pien *chia.* She knew now that the world was wide: a place of many interests, endless possibilities. She had heard. She wished to see, to taste and to glean.

But she was not ready yet. However, she must go.

The master had told her, "You need not go to-day. A few days from now, it will be best. To-morrow the actors come. Enjoy the plays." He added, "Here I have brushed

the name, and the street on which he lives, of a man who is beholden to me. His house is decent; his wife is kind. When they see my *chop* on this, they will give you lodging until you have found a hiring, and they will not overcharge you. Even Tring Ma herself might employ you to do the roughness of her daily toil; she grows old; and Tring Lee could afford her a small-wage serving-woman now. Kwan be with you!"

Li Soo bowed her thanks.

She would not stay, even the day, to see the theatricals, brought here at great expense to gratify Pien Lou, she resolved.

But she did.

The temptation was too great.

She had not witnessed a play since she had left her mother's hut; not often before then. And it was told in the women's courtyard that these who came—to please the whim of Pien Lou—were great and celebrated actors. One, Chu-Ko Yen was his name, was famed from Peking to Soochow.

Her impulse was to go before the serving-women, learning of her dismissal, jeered. She knew now why they had laughed!

But her Chinese passion for the theater pulled too hard, stronger than her pride.

She watched the players; forgot all else—for a time. She watched them wide-eyed, with a twitching face. She cursed the white-nosed villain. She wept for the handsome, beautifully garbed hero's sorrows.

CHAPTER XLV

AT dawn Li Soo crept out of the *chia;* walked out into her wilderness.

Her head was high, but her eyes were stark. Again she was afraid.

She had coins. She had spent nothing since she took her illicit passage on the boat. Pien Shê had dealt generously with her to the end, Pien Lou had paid her extravagantly until she had wearied of her. But Li Soo knew that even the sum she had would not last indefinitely. Nor was it enough to capitalize some highly profitable undertaking, if she had known of any such and known how to pursue it. She must earn more before she could establish herself on the lowest rung of the long ladder she was determined to climb.

She had good garments, and a few trinkets of whose value she had no idea. All these she had with her, stowed about her person, packed on her shoulders, slung on her arms, carried in her hands. She was awkwardly burdened, her going on much impeded. And the load she carried made her conspicuous, and doubly anxious.

If Shu A-fah had come to her now, she would have welcomed him.

Shu A-fah, too, was walking; faster than she, walking in the opposite direction.

He was going back to consult San Bin—unless some sudden impulse, clue or augury were to change his purposed course.

Li Soo trudged on alone, troubled, soon sore-footed.

Even if she reached the City Gate before the sun was creeping up, the gatekeeper would not unbar for her or let her pass. And when they opened the gates, they might demand where she was going, why, and what she carried.

She had the fragment of rice-paper on which Pien Shê had brushed what he had said would gain her the friendliness of the Trings—if only temporarily. Perhaps it would gain her the gate-guards' sufferance, protect her from their molestations. Pien Shê's *chop* was powerful in Red Cow City.

But what would it avail her here, if beggars or highwaymen came upon her?

She shook—a bird had called.

She smothered a cry—a pig had grunted.

Li Soo stopped and listened.

She could hear no human sound: neither footsteps nor wheels.

She shifted her bundles wearily, and went on.

When she could go no farther, she hid in a grain-field, ate and rested. Presently she slept.

Li Soo had not meant to sleep. It was an added risk.

But she had not slept the night before—too troubled to sleep.

She was very weary—wearied by her tense watching of the theatricals, worn-out by her grief at her failure to keep the shelter of rich Pien Shê's *chia.*

The Day-star flamed high above the grain-field when Li Soo woke.

A man was lounging beside her.

Once more the homeless exile smothered a cry. She was horribly frightened. And yet—even in this first instant, periled as she believed it, the man's eyes held her in a vise that something in Li Soo's core accepted, welcomed.

Her heart was beating furiously. She was in terror. But not all of her emotion was fear. Something was quickening that Li Soo had never felt before; it was startling, it stabbed her; but it had a sweetness.

If he intended to rob her, he had not robbed her yet. Her clothes-sack still pillowed her. All her belongings were close to her. She touched her ears hurriedly.

The stranger laughed softly.

The little gold circlets, so much the badge of Chinese women, who have none richer, that even Li Keen never had grudged her them, were in her ear-lobes.

Would he rob her? Take her coins from her? The best robe and the shining ornaments that Pien Lou had given?

Li Soo did not greatly care. Yet she was trembling.

The man laughed again.

His laugh sounded familiar, struck some cord of memory. And his laugh was music.

"Rest you, maiden. None will harm you." And when he spoke she knew him: Chu-Ko Yen the actor, the hero of yesterday's melting love-play.

Li Soo caught a little whispered breath of pleasure.

There were many social castes in China then. The lowest of them all was the actors'. They were "rogues and vagabonds" indeed. Few in all China that would share rice with an actor, fewer so mean that they would give a daughter in marriage to any actor.

From most of the lowly castes you might rise—a man by merit, a girl by beauty. A coolie-boy may become a mandarin; a coolie-girl please a great noble's eye, and be made his number-one. From the despised actor-caste there is no ascent. Once an actor, always an outcast.

Ignorant as Li Soo was of most things, she knew that that was so. All China knew.

Alone in a wide, hidden grain-field, with an actor; unprotected. No knife in her girdle. No kinsman to her call!

Her eyes met Chu-Ko Yen's eyes. Her ears drank his voice. Li Soo's heart throbbed oddly—not with fear.

CHAPTER XLVI

FOR twelve golden moons Chu-Ko Yen was kind to her, tender.

Life fulfilled itself to her, and she was glad; a girl again, radiant, carefree: Li Soo's year of happiness.

If often she drudged for him, he paid her with caresses. They paid her richly.

If she hungered with him—the strolling player's fortunes fluctuate in China as elsewhere—she hungered gaily; for he loved her. The love of Chu-Ko Yen was enough.

And because she loved him she came into her womanhood. She was proud and content to go beside him, homeless, outcast.

Often they fared sumptuously. But Chu-Ko Yen was improvident; rich to-day, coinless to-morrow. Improvidence is the actor's brand in many lands, Art's scourge, sometimes Art's spur and stimulant!

And always she served him well.

He gave her sunny hours, cordial companionship. He taught her something of his own art. And when he saw that she loved it, made progress in it, he drew her closer; and felt a new respect for her, and showed it. For Chu-Ko Yen was an artist, and loved the art that stigmatized him an outcast.

And Li Soo forgave Li Ho, because but for him she never would have known and loved Chu-Ko Yen.

Women were not allowed to take part in Chinese theatricals, and rarely did.

A boy player sickened and died. They thrust him into an unconsidered grave. And Chu-Ko bade Li Soo learn the lad's part very quickly. They were to play before a rich man's temple the next day. They would be paid richly. Li Soo must pretend to be a boy, and play the part of a young girl as a boy would play it. The gods be thanked, it was not a long part! The dead boy had been but an apprentice.

Li Soo smiled. She knew all the rôles he and his fellows played, she told him. Did she not watch and listen always?

"You have seen but a tenth-tenth of our many plays," he told her; which was quite true. The popular repertoire of the Chinese theater is erroneous. Players must be prepared to perform, almost at instant notice, any favorite play demanded. "Of that tenth of a tenth you may know many of the word-husks." (That was no feat for a Chinese memory. Half of the audience know every word of the classic plays, and the popular ones, to which they listen with rapt attention and with mounting emotion.) "That you know the words you will speak, is little."

"I know the rest," Li Soo claimed. "I know the ges-

tures, positions, face-movements, head-turns. I know the rôle, Chu-Ko Yen, you shall see."

And it proved so.

Chu-Ko Yen was well satisfied with Li Soo. When he quarreled with another actor and dismissed him Li Soo was given parts of more importance. Little by little she became an established member of the troupe. Among themselves the other actors grumbled; but none of them dared dispute the will of Chu-Ko Yen. And Li Soo became less handmaiden and more partner—for a time.

When she no longer could play presentably, because her figure grew matronly, Chu-Ko Yen was displeased. But paternity grips tight at the core of every Chinese man, even among the outcast actor-class, who can bequeath their sons but an outcast's inheritance, and must keep their daughters—if they trouble to keep them—for unwedded drudgery, give them in marriage only to actors, barbers or beggars—if even such will wed them—or sell them for next to nothing to the tainted service of the poorest tea-houses.

The child might be a son, and Chu-Ko Yen was not actively unkind to the mother, until she raged and fought because one day, returning from a city, he brought the girl No Teh back with him.

"If she stays, I go," Li Soo sobbed when her first fury had spent itself.

Chu-Ko Yen laughed.

"Go!" he told her.

No Teh giggled.

Li Soo flew towards her.

Chu-Ko Yen caught Li Soo and held her hard.

"Go in peace, or stay in peace," he said sharply. "There is work here for you to do, and food and food-bowl. But I will keep no disobedient woman with me. If I keep you, you will not molest No Teh my new-one; and I will allow no unfriendliness between you."

He spoke to Li Soo, but his eyes included the other girl in his command.

No Teh bent her head meekly; she did not giggle again.

Li Soo registered an ugly oath—and waited.

She had to wait. Failing Chu-Ko Yen, she was friendless. She had no coins, little strength, and her time was near.

A moon passed in smothered, smoldering rancor.

Li Soo was in panic lest again she bear a girl. She believed Chu Ko would not consent to keep a girl-child. If he slew it, or discarded it and left it to die, Chinese custom would uphold him. Even Li Soo's Chinese mind could not condemn him. But again her mother-heart brooded over her child.

She bore a son.

Chu-Ko Yen reinstated her in his tenderness. In the next city he gave No Teh a thin purse and left her.

Li Soo forgave him. After all, he had but followed custom.

The old rapture came back to her; but not the old content. She forgave the lover who had not sinned against Chinese usage. But she did not forget No Teh. And Li Soo could not forget that, at any time, in any city, another No Teh might come to the arms of Chu-Ko Yen.

Li Soo put the thought away from her as best she could; snatched at her present happiness—such as it was; served her lover even more devotedly, loved him even more than she had.

The child ailed.

At Little Cold it died. Chu-Ko Yen mourned it for a day; then he shrugged and bade her bear another son.

Li Soo's grief stayed, and grieving now for little Red Tiger—as his father had milk-named him—she grieved anew for Fragrant Cucumber.

Often when she lay sleepless, she wished that she might

see Pang Kee, wished that she might learn how it fared with her.

One day she hid a coin. She would hide others. Some day perhaps, when she had the price, she would find some honest one who, being about to travel in that direction, would carry for her a measure of white rice to the hut in Shantung.

She should not see her mother again, unless the actors chanced to go so far; for Li Soo knew that she never would leave Chu-Ko Yen. She was his.

But at many a wayside shrine, in many a temple courtyard and god-room, she tarried a moment and lit a prayer-stick, or—lacking the joss-stick's price—offered up a rag-or-paper shred of crimson, that it might pray with her that Kwan Yin would drive Chu-Ko Yen to journey far and farther; journey even into the Sacred Province; lead him to the City from which she could make her way to the hut of Pang Kee her mother.

She often gazed long into the distance, wishing that she might see Shu A-fah coming towards her. She would like Shu A-fah to see her happiness; see that to her Chu-Ko Yen was a prince-one; see how her man loved and cherished her! Shu A-fah would not grudge her her happiness. Always Shu A-fah was good and kind. He loved her unselfishly; all their years together had proved it.

In her infatuation for her sometimes responsive lover she forgot how low a rung—even for a poor, peasant hut-girl—she had slipped down to in her union with an actor.

When she remembered it dimly—as occasionally she was forced to—she told herself hotly that Shu A-fah, a no-one who had invented the name he carried, because he knew not his father's, need not look down upon the actor, her lover.

She wished that Shu A-fah might come upon them somewhere. If he did, he should go her message-one to the hut of Pang Kee. He should take rice to Pang Kee, the little rice that Li Soo's hidden coins would buy. Returning,

again meeting the actor-troupe somewhere, he should give her word of her mother-one; and she would receive it greedily.

Li Soo often wondered where Shu A-fah was, what he did, how he fared.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE fourth day of the fifth moon!

Li Soo knew it was that, because it was a Shantung godling's birthday that she and her mother always had honored.

And on that little-god's birthday three years ago Pang Kee's trembling arms had lifted her into the hired bride-chair!

She looked long and searchingly into Chu-Ko Yen's make-up mirror, and Li Soo sighed heavily.

It was one of her daily tasks to polish the great circle of steel. No one else did so to Chu-Ko Yen's liking. One hint of one speck of dimness on its reflecting surface enraged him.

She used to love rubbing the great mirror, and rubbing it again and again. It was heavy, awkward to hold. But when he had praised its smooth, perfect surface, Li Soo had not minded if her arms ached a little and her fingers felt numb.

She found the task a task now. He would not thank or praise her to-day. Chu-Ko Yen did not often praise her now.

And she knew how well she had served him, served him still.

Three years ago to-day! The truth-show-mirror had told her relentlessly how those three little years had aged her. If they were to come face-to-face now, she and Shu A-fah, her own face would show the older. And even Shu A-fah's kind partial eyes could find none of the old

beauty he had loved, and loved to praise, in her pain-aged face.

Better far she had stayed with Shu A-fah!

Why had she left him? Why?

Li Soo finished her task, finished it scrupulously. But she did not look in the mirror again. It had told her enough.

It was not toil that had aged and spoiled her. The sturdy peasant stock she came of had been toil-used for centuries. Too, her tasks grew lighter. Chu-Ko Yen prospered now, prospered increasingly, with fewer and briefer lapses into stinted means; for his art grew, his fame spread. He did not drive her hard. Never a brutal task-master, he had exacted much less of late.

It was not Li Ho who much had aged her. She never had loved Li Ho. For moons at a time she never thought of him or of Li Keen.

Neglect and indifference had aged and were ageing her; her lover's whom she loved. His chilling to her—and the women.

They came and went, the other women; but always one gone or dismissed was replaced.

Some of them Li Soo had pitied, but she had hated them all. She hated them because they pleased him to whom she longed to be all, the only one. She knew that he would tire and discard; but that one of them pleased him for a day tore and tortured her. She hated them many times more and more bitterly because she knew that they all—even the most mercenary and selfish one—loved Chu-Ko Yen, valued his caress more than his coin, would follow him fawningly as long as he would permit.

The lure of the actor! Universal, world-wide, it is one of sex's unreadable riddles. The glamor the actor has for women who are not of his craft is simple enough. But his lure is as strong for the women of his own trade; indefinable, inexplicable. There was not too much about Chu-Ko Yen to hold the women who saw him rid of his trap-

pings, natural, at careless ease. But he held them. And Li Soo writhed that he did. She wished that hers might be the only fidelity given him.

Often she longed to escape. But her infatuation held her.

And Chu-Ko Yen might sicken and need her. He might fall upon hard times again; almost she wished it, for who would cling to him then but she? Gladly she'd work for them both; break stones, steal in the market-place—if only again he might be hers, hers alone. He might grow old and be friendless. His years were more than her years. He knew no craft but his stage craft; when time or illness robbed him of that, he would need her. The actors' guild would grant him but meager dole, and grant it sourly; for he had subscribed to it meanly and grudgingly.

Li Soo rubbed the mirror of steel till it shone bright as clearest moonlight.

But she did not look into it again.

To call a Chinese woman a "venerable hag" is the highest compliment you can pay her; even love's flattery can go no farther. But few and far are the Chinese women who relish *seeing* that it is true. Little as the Chinese fear death, greatly as they enjoy their own funerals—in anticipation—death lures few of them, fewer long for white hair, shriveled skin, dull eyes, bowed backs.

Li Soo bent over the mirror, giving a last rub—her arms were rebelling; she could not hold it much longer. A tear fell on to the steel, and streaked it. Li Soo's tears were rare now. But she was terribly tired. And an hour ago she had heard Chu-Ko Yen call Ki Loon to him tenderly.

But he was not with Ki Loon now.

For he came toward Li Soo, and standing behind her he saw the havoc her weeping had made on his look-steel.

"Fool! Think I keep you to drip brine on my elegant mirror! Ten devils take you."

Li Soo sprang up, rubbing the steel with her sleeve desperately.

"It shall shine again like your fragrance," she murmured.

"Not from your sluttish fingers!"

Ki Loon had displeased him but now. A tooth ached. He had lost a week's earnings at a card-house last night.

He snatched the mirror away. He lifted it menacingly. But Li Soo did not shrink from that, she knew that Chu-Ko Yen would not injure or risk his make-up look-see; she shrank from the hate in his eyes.

She held out her arms to him with a piteous gesture.

And Chu-Ko Yen, clutching the burnished disc in one arm, clenched his fist, and struck her.

Cold with fury, heedless of what it might cost her, Li Soo stood motionless, but her blazing eyes cursed him, her curling lip taunted him.

And in that moment of queenly defiance—it was not less—Chu-Ko Yen came nearer a great and manly passion than his life of dalliance had known before: the self-lover almost loved Li Soo with new and kindling fealty. He almost took her in his arms and claimed her with a new and better ardor than he had given her in the warmth-time of their clinging.

There was metal in Chu-Ko Yen the actor; it rang true to the angry woman's metal.

And he was ashamed.

His shame vexed and stung him; he turned and left her. He put the mirror down near Li Soo, gestured her to polish it again.

The woman watched him out of sight.

Then she turned in another direction, and went slowly from their camp-place; not knowing where she went, but knowing that she'd not come back or be overtaken.

But Chu-Ko Yen would not seek her. He was done

with her. He had tired of her long ago. He would not seek to overtake her.

Well—she was done with him.

Never again would she crave his presence, to see him, hear his voice! And she believed it! Three little years had taught Li Soo much; but she had not learned the serfdom of woman's heart. Such love as she had given Chu-Ko Yen does not wither, much less die, in a day. One blow does not kill it—or many.

Memories would clutch and drag her. But she believed that she was leaving him forever, never to regret. She was done with Chu-Ko Yen. Another chapter ended in the sorrow-shame thing that was called life!

It would go hard indeed with her, if she did not wrest something from the coming years: food and raiment, shelter and warmth. A plunge in the canal in the night's darkness, if all else failed! But Li Soo the Shantung peasant did not mean to fail.

She knew that she was walking towards the east. The Sacred Province was east from this. Shantung should be her goal. No matter how long the journey, she would go home.

She'd take a little rice, no matter how little, home with her, if she could. But silk-clad or ragged, with a little rice or empty-handed, she was going home.

The woman walked on until she could walk no longer. Too, the throbbing of her crippled feet warned her not to try them too cruelly, lest they shackle and defeat her.

The sun was almost setting. She had not eaten since dawn.

Behind the bamboos she found a pool. She drank thirstily and long.

Li Soo was not frightened. She was too unhappy to be afraid.

She would sleep.

At dawn she would go on, remembering not to drive

her lilies too far. She would find food somewhere and eat.

Sitting sheltered by the great bamboos, Li Soo's face suddenly quivered.

What was Chu-Ko doing?

Who had cooked his evening-rice?

Was her face bruised? To-morrow the pool would tell her that.

Her face ached.

She wondered if her father ever had struck her mother. Pang Kee had spoken fondy and proudly of Pang Lee to their child.

Would Pang Kee have forgiven it, if Pang Lee had? Forgotten it even, as the long years went?

Li Soo dozed fitfully; she scarcely slept.

Night-birds stirred and cried above her. Life of fur and feather was restless in the bamboos. Twice a cart passed on the road not far away. The moon blazed. A woman screamed shrilly in the mat-hut that Li Soo had not noticed, almost hidden in its field of maize. Had a man struck her? A cold wind rose at dawn; it chilled the crouching woman.

Her head throbbed.

She was faint with hunger.

She dragged herself to the pool, drank as much as she could—breakfasting so—bathed her aching forehead.

Then she rose stiffly, to journey on. She believed that she had come half-way to the small mud-walled town that she saw above the tamarisks and oaks on a low hillside. She tore off a handful of bamboo twigs, to chew, and trudged slowly on. She was cramped and foot-sore. But sitting here in the chilly morning would scarcely mend those. This was not the time when bamboo shoots were young and succulent.

Li Soo walked carefully, nursing her feet so, as much as she could. To find the softer, easier footholds, she scarcely lifted her eyes from the ground. An early pedler greeted her politely, "Have you bathed?" She answered as cor-

rectly, "Have you bathed?" But she did not look up, and they went on their opposite ways. A laden-donkey's driver begged her, "Lend me your brightness," and she drew aside to let him pass. The way was narrow here, not much room for one, no room for two. Again she did not glance at the stranger.

A lark sang in a maple tree, but Li Soo did not hear it. To-day she was deaf and blind to beauty.

An hour later her hungry nostrils caught the scent of roses. And famished Li Soo stopped and looked about eagerly.

A low mud-wall—the scanty earthworks of a vegetable patch—was cascaded with wild white roses. Creamy beauties.

The famished woman hesitated, trembling. The sacredly lovely white roses were intoxicatingly sweet.

They forbade. But they invited.

They tempted her.

Li Soo ate. Rose petal after rose petal, until even such hunger as hers asked no more.

Li Soo's eyes brimmed with tears.

"Forgive me. I starved," she sobbed to the wild white roses whose lovely companions she had eaten. "I will burn a prayer when I first have the price," she promised. And the roses on the wall nodded nicely, as if appeased and satisfied. But the peasant girl, trudging wearily on again, was ashamed and stricken that she had slain the lovely, fragrant, wild white roses.

But hunger gnawed her less.

CHAPTER XLVIII

SHE saw Shu A-fah before he saw her. He all but passed her without glancing towards her. For Shu A-fah, too, was weary. The sack on his back was heavy. And to-day he was not searching for Pang Soo.

He was not even thinking of her.

Shu A-fah had given up his quest of Pang Soo months ago. San Bin the cat-cutter had urged it, when Shu A-fah, hoping that Pang Soo might have made her way back to her only friend, had gone to the hut behind the onion-bed.

"You will find her in their time, if the god-ones will it. You will find her when you cease to seek, it is more probable than that you will by searching for her. Acquire wealth—such fragment of wealth as you can—the lily-one likes things that are soft to touch, fair to see, spiced foods. Prepare for her coming, if you will not put her from your longing; but search for her no more."

And at last Shu A-fah had followed the older man's advice; partly because he was convinced that San Bin was a seer, partly because San Bin had convinced him that China's vastness made such searching desperate, hopeless.

"Waste no more time with useless, impoverishing journeying. Find an industry you can employ profitably—and wait. Here she will not come again. Linger not here hoping it. Work and wait. In industriousness you may acquire the wiseness to remember that there are women in China, many women fair and docile."

Shu A-fah had smiled grayly at that last. But for the rest he had followed San Bin's advice.

Shu A-fah was a merchant now, and he was thriving.

He had a shop of his own now. It prospered modestly. He had money saved and banked. He bought and sold many things. Musical instruments and farm implements were the most and best of his stock. He bought shrewdly and sold reasonably. Little by little he was building up a reputation for reliability. He even had a servant in his shop, crippled Nu Bang, who was faithful and made flutes and whistles skilfully. Every few moons Shu A-fah, leaving the shop in Nu's charge, went from town to town to buy and sell harps, flutes and fiddles, went from village to village to sell hoes and spades; carrying his oddly assorted merchandise with him.

Li Soo shrank back as far as she could against the heap of stones, loosely stacked at the path-side. She did not wish Shu A-fah to see her plight. But, pressing against the insecure heap, her weight pushed down a stone. It fell with a clatter, and he heard, turned toward the crouching woman, and saw her.

At his sob of joy the color ebbed back into the weary woman's face.

Some one cared!

Shu A-fah thrust down his wares, and gained her side in a stride.

"Lily-one! I have found you! The old cat-cutter spoke truth-words!"

"San Bin sent you! He knows not my home-place."

Home-place. Shu A-fah winced at the word. To him from her it was ominous.

He looked about. As far as he could see there was no dwelling here.

"The old-one did not send me. He forbade me to seek you longer. He promised that when I no longer sought you I should find."

"But you must hurry on your business," she told him, "and I have an errand in the city."

"Then my business shall return there. My business shall go close with your errand, flower-one of all China. But let us rest us first a short time here in the pleasant shelter of these rocks' shadow. You look wearied, lady-one, and I have words that must be spoken."

"None for me," Li Soo told him hurriedly. "Go your way, I entreat you."

Shu A-fah moved a little nearer.

"How did I offend you, that you left me? I beg you tell me, Pang Soo."

"You are unmannerly to call me that!" she snapped more angrily than she felt. She was sorely anxious to be rid of him. In his gladness at their meeting, he was blind to her plight—though he had seen that she was weary.

Soon his eyes must clear. Too she feared to betray herself. She was faint and ill.

"Forgive my uncouthness," Shu A-fah begged meekly. "Not for great wealth would I offend you. But," he added hotly, "you of sureness must know that in his heart your slave, Shu A-fah, always calls you that. How did I offend you, lady?"

"You did not offend me," Li Soo said wearily. "I had my own way to travel. I had my own plans. I like not farewells, so I took none."

"I have news for you."

"Keep it. My errand has waited too long. Nay; I will go alone. In kindness, go your own way, Shu A-fah."

"Your way is my way!" he cried.

"I will not have it so."

"I am gaining fortune! Slowly, I must admit. But each day my earning is more than I spend away. My love will never fail you. My love will never leave you. I have not the honey-words to woo. I am uncouth, untaught. But I am strong. Let the years that have been between us since your baby-days speak my love to you. I will serve you while I live. I will shelter you while we live. My prosperity grows. Our sons shall follow a costly coffin to your grave. Grant me that we drink together the red-tied wine-cup in the nuptial hour. Never will I thwart you—"

"You thwart me now. Let me pass, Shu A-fah."

"O hear me!"

"I have heard enough. Your words are not music in my ear!"

"I have news."

"I desire it not."

"Li Ho is dead!"

Li Soo shrugged.

"The small-pox came. You are free to wed."

"Not with you!"

"Scorn me not, I implore. Let us go together to Pang Kee. She ails. A man of our Shantung city, where I first saw you, knowing that her only daughter had been carried to Shensi, spoke of Pang Kee to San Bin. She ails. Still she craves, I think. Such cravings as hers was do not die while life lasts. Let us make our one way to Pang Kee. We will carry to her rice."

Li Soo, gesturing with an outstretched arm for him to hush, staggered where she stood in her weakness, and must have fallen, if Shu A-fah had not caught and held her.

It was not what he had told her of her mother that had sickened her.

She did not doubt what he had said; neither of Pang Kee, nor of Li Ho. She knew that Shu A-fah would not lie to her. But in her own physical misery, growing more and more every moment, she had heard, but had *felt* little.

The word "rice" had undone her. It had brought no thought to her of the white grain that Pang Kee had so longed to eat. "Rice," the universal food-word of China—used for "daily bread" even where rice does not grow, and never is seen—had shattered and nauseated her because of her trembling hunger.

She made one last sick effort to save her face.

"Help me a little way towards the city, Shu A-fah; but a little way, and then leave me. I would hasten there to eat. I neglected my rice last night. I left home before morning-rice was prepared. And in the importance of my happy errand, I gave it no thought. But now I hunger unto faintness. Delay me no longer."

"Delay you, sweet one!"

He cursed the very gods, that in his merchandise that he carried there was no thing eatable.

He would take her swiftly to the city's first eat-place. When she had eaten, he would woo her again.

He would woo her until he won her.

Letting his pack lie where he had flung it, leaving it

to rot where it was, or to be stolen, whichever might be, he caught Li Soo up into his arms tenderly, and turned swiftly toward the city.

In her weakness Li Soo began to sob weakly.

He hastened on, pouring passionate love-words, interspersed with tactless promising of dumplings and pickled fish, ginger and tea. Shu A-fah no longer felt weary.

But suddenly a man stayed them.

Li Soo, dazed with hunger and fatigue, had not heard the other come. Shu A-fah, obsessed with her, had had neither eyes nor hearing for any other.

Before they knew that they were not still alone, a strong hand caught Li Soo away, flung her against the crumbling wall they were passing.

"The wanton is mine," Chu-Ko Yen told Shu A-fah. "While I keep the soiled one, I do not share her. Go you."

Shu A-fah heard the foul words spoken to the lily-one whom he loved: Li Soo always pure and fair to him. He saw a drop of blood on her quivering chin. It was not much. But roughness had cut it there.

Shu A-fah, snarling, fell upon Chu-Ko Yen, literally tooth and nail, spitting straight in Chu-Ko Yen's face, spittling him eyes and mouth.

The fight was tiger fighting.

Neither spoke.

The girl gasped—she could not scream.

Neither would yield.

Neither yielded.

But one fell.

The fight was not long.

Chu-Ko Yen was far the stronger, trained in wrestling, better fed.

Li Soo heard the bone snap. Shu A-fah was on the ground, a shoulder wrenched, an ankle broken and useless.

She made to go to him.

Chu-Ko Yen caught her up, sat her on his shoulder,

an arm close about her, holding her secure but not unkindly, and carried her so, back to his camp-place.

How would he punish her? Li Soo wondered sickly.

And yet she knew that she was glad to feel Chu-Ko Yen's arm about her.

Shu A-fah tried to rise. He could not. Dragging his broken ankle behind him, he crawled desperately after them, seized a great brick and hurled it at Chu-Ko Yen, hurled it carefully that it should not reach Pang Soo.

"I will come to you. I will find you," he called to her.

Chu-Ko Yen laughed.

CHAPTER XLIX

TWO men had fought for her; neither of them had sought her when he had come upon her. Chu-Ko Yen had had no wish to find her.

Still a little ashamed of himself—ashamed to have struck the mother of his son—when he had learned at early rice-time that she had gone he had not regretted it. She had been a good servant, but he had a knack of exacting good, and—at least from women—usually willing service. Better a servant less than a weeping, quarrelsome woman more.

He'd be served.

Ki Loon pleased him still. Li Soo bored him now.

He could spare her less comfortably in the theater. Well, he must find another boy apprentice, and find him quickly. Ki Loon had no carrying in her voice, lacked memory for words. Take it all in one piece, he was not sorry that Li Soo had gone. Nothing is less to a man's taste, little less in his mercy, than a woman who no longer amuses or lures him.

Chu-Ko Yen was on his way to the city to search for an apprentice when he came upon Shu A-fah and Li Soo.

Seeing her in another man's arms enraged Chu-Ko Yen.

And for the moment it enhanced her to him again. His vanity was stung, that she had found consolation so soon. He saw that the man who held her wore clothes of good quality. Had she fallen on a silken carpet so soon?

If he did not desire her for himself, the thing was his, no other should have her without his consent. He might give or sell her, but no man should take!

The memory of their hours of spiced and gentle nearness revived, too—somewhat. He would neither give nor sell her—yet.

And he had fought for her. In his rage he would have fought for her to the death.

When he heard Shu A-fah's ankle snap Chu-Ko Yen grinned.

When Shu A-fah called after her Chu-Ko Yen laughed.

But he did not punish Li Soo.

When they reached the actors' camp-place he put her down with a lingering caress.

For a moon Chu-Ko Yen played cat-and-mouse with his two concubines; on the whole neglecting and tormenting Ki Loon rather more than he did Li Soo.

Ki Loon sulked when she dared.

Li Soo was restless.

Had Shu A-fah found succor? Had he died on the wayside?

Free to go, she would have gone back to him, and tended him until she could have found some one else to tend and aid him.

Li Soo was not all selfish. She was not dead to gratitude.

And she knew which was the better man.

But she did not go to Shu A-fah. Chu-Ko Yen kept her close.

When Li Soo, in the sultry Peach-moon, woke in an emptied camp—all gone but the low mat-hut she lay in—she did not weep. Though she loved Chu-Ko Yen with a passion that would die slow and hard, she despised him

now. And she accepted his callous desertion for her escape that it was.

The little that was hers he had left her, and a gourd of weak wine, a loaf of maize and a short string of *cash*.

Li Soo ate and drank, bathed, dug her own secret wallet up from its hiding place, bundled her few possessions, and walked quietly away.

Slow years passed.

Shu A-fah worked and earned; limping a little now as he always would limp. His leg was mended, it did not ache, but Chu-Ko Yen had lamed him. His lameness would limp with him to his grave.

When he could, he had tried again to find Li Soo, for he had promised her that he would.

He had failed.

And after a time he had ceased to search, leaving it to Kwan, and laying by all he could against the day—soon or far—when the gods might again give them meeting.

Slow years passed in Shantung. Old Pang Kee was going back to babyhood, crawling listlessly to her second infancy. She could fend for herself but little now. But because her feebleness was the feebleness of white-haired age the peasant neighbors, almost poor as she, spared her something. And she still lived. At far intervals her rheumy eyes cleared and brightened for a moment. And then she mumbled, "Rice," and giggled and forgot; or mumbled, "Lily-one," and wept, dozed and forgot.

The slow years passed, hard years for Li Soo; but less slowly for her than for Pang Kee and Shu A-fah.

Her life was a life of many things. It was a life of ups and downs, as it is with all except those who are very fortunate or very unfortunate.

She fought life the tiger.

Hers was a tigerish fight. She fought well. She kept her head and used her wits. Always quick-witted, cold and hard of heart now, she did not again hunger. Her

health grew. The many sorts of work she found, and did with all her strength, all were out-of-doors. Food enough, fresh air, persistent pluck, ambition tamed and modified, but not dead, kept her well, gave her purpose and confidence.

She no longer looked older than her years. Her face bloomed softly. Her eyes once more were jewels.

Several courtyards would have opened to her, giving her a concubine's aimless ease. She passed them by. She was free now, mistress of her own troubles and pleasures. She loved her freedom, prized it, clutched it tight.

Twice marriage was within her reach. She passed it by. The men were poor, and neither of them attracted her. If she must drudge and drudge hard, all her drudgery should be for herself. If a rich man came—but none did.

It tells much of Chinese complacency, that the unattached woman went and came unmolested as she would, where she would. She was questioned constantly—Chinese curiosity is insatiable—but no one interfered with her.

And her aloneness was enough to have raised the curiosity of the very stones and trees.

Solitary wayfaring Chinese men are many and constant, going from place to place, seeking casual jobs—always returning to their homes, or intending to, when they can. Perhaps no Chinese woman ever before had wandered about China alone.

No one knew her, no one learned anything about her, except what she chose to tell them. It was pretty telling often, rarely twice the same story.

Her hair told her a maid-one—for so she chose to wear it now.

A girl alone, going calmly about her own business! It was without precedent, made of scandal-stuff.

But Li Soo contrived to carry it.

She asked for nothing but work and payment.

From place to place she found it. And she worked well.

Li Soo was moderately content. She was rarely lonely.

The open spaces companioned her, the leafy trees, lovely, smiling flower-faces, birds that sang before they flew away, the sky's soft tapestries, woodland perfumes.

And her own self-sufficiency companioned her. Li Soo thought well of herself; the self-centered are not easily lonely.

The gross word that Chu-Ko Yen had called her, she did not merit then; for she had loved him. She did not merit it now. She sold her toil and strength to all who would buy—and pay. She never sold herself.

Perhaps it chanced so. Possibly it was instinct—or deep shrewdness.

Li Soo the homeless, friendless Chinese peasant, was neither moral nor immoral. She followed her bent—when she could. Perchance it was written that she always would. She was her own law now. Probably she always would be.

Of Li Ho she never thought, nor of Li Keen.

She thought of Chu-Ko Yen less and less.

Shu A-fah came to her thought somewhat often. All her thought of him was kind. Sometimes it had a flush of summer, a hint of trembling spring.

She remembered the children she had borne—one to a marriage-mat of hatred, one to love.

She thought constantly of a tiny grave she had made near the yellow roses. She sat there often, when she seemed to be sitting idle by wayside or on temple steps, or waiting for her food-dish at a farmhouse door, sitting meekly on the broad black doorstep. She nursed little Fragrant Cucumber and crooned to her. And the woman's hard eyes brimmed. She loved her baby very dearly.

She thought of her boy-child almost as often, almost as fondly.

Li Soo longed for them both.

She wished that another child might move beneath her girdle—and, born, might snuggle at her breast.

She thought of Pang Kee. Except to reach work that

had been definitely offered her, each time she journeyed on she went towards far Shantung.

She had many thoughts for company—and the friendly things of Nature.

Often she had human chat and shelter. More than once she had acquaintance that might have grown to friendship, if Li Soo the wandering homeless had nursed it.

Li Soo never did.

CHAPTER L

IF a stone that rolls gathers little moss, still variety of occupation spices industry.

Li Soo did twenty things in as few moons.

Night after night she gathered odious forms of fertilizer into stout bamboo buckets. At dawn, when her buckets were full, she lifted the pole that held them together across her shoulders, and carried and sold.

Such merchanting is general in China. If city and village streets are less pleasant because of it, gardens and fields are richer from it. In the most crowded, narrow street all made way for Li Soo and her carefully-balanced, hanging buckets.

She sat on her wee low stool and sewed—one of the sew-sew *amahs* that go from door to door patching China.

Of all the work she tried, this tired her pretty crippled feet least. But Li Soo plied it the least successfully. Coarse and rough-and-ready as is the needlework entrusted to such "sew-sews," Li Soo did it too badly. None would buy her stitchery twice. And she hated it.

The way she went was not easy; rarely pleasant. But she trudged it sturdily. If her lilies flinched and her arms ached, her spirit never flagged. After the first few days she seldom was very hungry, she not often was cold; utterly alone, she never was lonely.

What she saw companioned her.

Cities, villages, bamboo-embowered hamlets, interested

her—they and the human life that moved in and through them.

But Nature companioned her more, spoke to her, answered her, gave her tender, gracious intimacy, never failed or repulsed her, called and quickened and satisfied her affection as no human companionship—except the babes at her breast—ever had done.

She was not alone! Flowers and trees, birds and dragonflies, water, golden sun, silver moon were with her. They gladdened and soothed her. She broke the communion bread of their beauty. She heard their eloquence.

Little more than a baby, her eyes had danced at the sight of the red rose an urchin had given her, and her baby soul had quivered at its fragrant beauty.

Eyes and soul the wandering woman was glad, strengthened, refreshed at every beauty she saw. China has endless beauties. Man often has gnashed and ravished her. Nature never has stinted her.

By luck—or perhaps Kwan led her—Li Soo was wandering through a superlatively beautiful part of lovely, laughing China.

Her girlhood beauty came back to her here; the beauty of Nature shared with the solitary homeless, perhaps.

Half by chance, perhaps a little by instinct, certainly partly by intention, she bore to the south, and bore towards the east.

Shantung was east. Rice grew in the south.

Sometimes she knew that she was going home, home to Shantung. Sometimes she believed that she should not; believed that, if she ever reached the border of the Sacred Province, she would turn back before her feet touched the soil of Shantung. But always she kept her face turned towards Shantung. As well that road as another.

Though going towards her old home, because she went to the east, she, too, was going still farther away from it, because she went towards the south. Rice grew in the south. Li Soo, for the sake of Pang Soo and a vow Pang

Soo once had made, and for the sake of Pang Soo's mother, wished to see fields of growing rice. She would see rice in bud and in flower and in fruit. She would see rice where white rice was plenty.

Why?

Perhaps in honor of Pang Kee; perhaps a vagrant fancy.

Li Soo had eaten white rice more than once. It had been no great rarity in rich Pien Shê's kitchens. Once in a great noble's lavish courtyard she and Chu-Ko Yen had feasted on it.

There were many foods that she liked more. And each time it had a little strangled her—because she could not share it with her mother.

Whether she ate rice again or not, Li Soo was indifferent, but she would see the honorable rice living and growing, if she could.

After that—

Shantung?

The gods knew, not she.

Where was Shu A-fah? How fared he? Did he live?

Oftener and oftener she thought of Shu A-fah. She wished him well.

She thought of Chu-Ko Yen less and less, thought of him oftener with a curling lip. The blow he had struck still stung. Passion had burnt itself out; contempt had replaced it, and survived.

Twice as she journeyed she knew that she longed for Shu A-fah, or knew at least that she would welcome him if he came upon her now.

But Shu A-fah did not come.

If he had, he might have won a new happiness, or he might have gathered a new sorrow.

The flaming love that she had given worthless Chu-Ko Yen she never would give again. She never would feel it again. The passion of womanhood was dead in Li Soo. But there were qualities in her now of gratitude and of

justice and of sounder, finer appreciation that she had lacked in her younger years. The Nature she lived with, leaned on, was guiding, teaching Li Soo. She was older, kinder, riper for friendship, reciprocity, partnership.

The scent of the red rose of so long ago was sweeter and nearer to her now, than the spiced fumes of the hot wine-cups she had drained with Chu-Ko Yen.

But Shu A-fah did not come.

Li Soo trudged on.

She was not unhappy.

She liked her freedom; she loved the wind in her face, the little wild-flowers at her feet.

She never trod on a flower.

A family of squirrels followed her for a day, for the nuts she gave. She laughed and was glad to spare to them her meal. One by one she gave them every nut she had, and chattered to them while they cracked and munched.

She nursed a hurt bird in her bosom, mourned when it died, and buried it in a shroud of ferns in a lily bed.

Singing to herself softly, because the day was so golden, Li Soo's song suddenly hushed. She stood very still, shading her eyes with her amber hand, a lump in her throbbing throat, her wondering eyes riveted on the miracle.

Green . . . exquisite . . . tremulous . . . a sea of soft-green, softest feathers; gossamer fine—cobwebs of delicate emerald. Or was it a sea of baby ferns? Or was it the garden of Kwan?

Li Soo did not know what it was.

She did not wish to know.

A name, a mere word, would profane it.

Green so translucent, such heavenly color and tint that it made Heaven's own blue above it look mean! Why did the Son-of-Heaven, who could command all things, wear yellow? Why did Kwan wear blue?

Li Soo stood a long time; gloating, worshiping.

When her knees trembled and her lilies ached, she squatted down, and watched the green rippling ocean until night dimmed then hid it.

She crept a little nearer at dawn, and watched the sun rise over her sea of jeweled green.

Coolie women, bare-legged, their trousers tucked up to their thighs, passed her. One of them spoke to her; then another. Li Soo bowed her head politely, gestured courteous greeting with folded hands. But if the women had questioned her, she did not answer them. She had not understood them.

Presently she went a little nearer—half afraid that the beauty might lessen, seem less mystic.

It did. Rough lines of black intersected the field of soft-emerald feathers.

Li Soo retreated a little. She would not approach it nearer again.

But she did.

Curiosity did not overcome her resolve. She was not curious.

You He came upon her, and asked what she was doing.

When he saw that she did not understand him, he repeated his question in mandarin.

"This no-one rests herself, eminent," she told him.

The man studied her garments. They were rough and poor.

"Would work?" he demanded.

"Gladly," she said.

"Follow me," he ordered. "My rice needs more women."

"The honorable rice?" Li Soo gasped, gesturing toward the sea of quivering green.

"You come from north of the river!" he guessed with a smile. "You have not seen a rice-farm before?"

"True words, O lord-one!"

You He laughed.

"Follow me. You will learn."

Li Soo served You He for a year.

You He was a mighty farmer. He grew other crops, but rice was his chief. It was his paddy-fields that he loved. And from them he reaped most of his wealth.

His new coolie-one did whatever he bade her. And at all she worked with admirable will. But the watchful master soon saw that she gave her best to her toil at his rice.

Towards the year's close he believed that she knew almost as much about rice as he did; understood and loved it as well. And You He pondered and wondered.

At first he had thought that she worked so hard and indefatigably because she had hungered, and feared to hunger again; feared lest he might dismiss her.

He came to see that it was more than that.

It was much more than that.

The rice talked to Li Soo.

Every blade, every grain, it spoke to her of her mother.

But, too, she loved it, and loved to tend and to garden it for itself. She never wearied of wading in the water that for so much of the year covers the fast-growing rice-plants. In pulling up the delicate young plants pricking through the black earth after their thick sewing, and replanting them, three together in a tiny carefully prepared hole, her fingers never blundered or broke.

The fertile, tenderly tended place yielded always two magnificent rice-crops. In best years it yielded three.

You He grew many rices: red, white, yellow, hard and sticky, round grained and long, opaque and dense. Li Soo knew and nursed them all.

She sowed, manured, coaxed, replanted, harvested, husked out the pretty ivory grains, packed them for market. She learned to cook rice perfectly—one of the finest achievements of the fine-art named Cookery. At the New Year she popped rice as successfully as You He's mother and wives could. And when she carried her great baskets of it among the festival's joy-makers her snowy ware sold as fast as she could offer it.

It was the growing, almost ready-to-harvest white rice that Li Soo loved most, its grains of lovely white against the green-leafed spikes making You He's rice-gardens oddly like fields of lilies-of-the-valley in fragrant bloom.

But she loved it all; moved to it perhaps by the sound of her mother's voice in the long-ago when Pang Kee had said, "I long to eat white rice." Or perhaps the mother's longing had touched the unborn child that came to life in the mud-hut's cruel winter.

Selfishness left Li Soo in the rice-fields of You He, and did not find her again.

She worked and hoarded, she scanted herself that before it was too late she might carry a catty of rice to longing Pang Kee.

The blades of lovely green called her to her mother. The grains of pearl called her to Shantung. Li Soo heard. Her heart answered, "I come."

Small wonder she tended his rice plants well, and greatly pleased You He.

The fish that swarmed, and fattened for market, in the succulent water that covered the young rice's beds knew her voice. The crested white paddy-birds had no fear of Li Soo; at their greediest they would come to her for crumbs.

Sometimes at night she woke fearing that some evil threatened the rice. And she went out to paddy-fields and watched them till day.

When great-heat came she often spread her sleep-mat in the cool of the fruit-heavy whampee-trees that guarded the north rice-field, and lay smiling, listening to the water-frogs until they croaked her to sleep.

A white-rice clump ailed and wilted. Li Soo fed it from her own basinful of cuttle-fish—the food she liked best. The plants lived, and yielded splendidly. They knew her their friend; she thought them hers.

Every blade of rice—every tiniest blade—spoke to her of Pang Kee, pulled her toward her mother.

She worked with Pang Kee's own indefatigability. She saved with Pang Kee's own relentless thrift.

Again she almost forgot Shu A-fah. She lived for her wage, for what she could save and hoard until she had enough. Enough to take her, with a sackful of rice, to Shantung.

Other coolie women came and went, but Li Soo stayed. When rice work was slack You He gave her other work to do. He had no wish to lose track of the woman who did the usual work of two, and did it skilfully and cheerfully.

Ping Shek, leaning from her cart, saw the girl gathering cherries. And Ping Shek ordered her driver to halt.

The driver lit his pipe. He knew why he had been told to stop. He knew that Ping Shek's scrutiny would be deliberate.

"Exquisite arms. A lovely neck. Hands work-stained and roughened. That can be cured. I never have seen more beautiful hands. A little older than suits me best."

"Her paint would show her younger," the serving-woman, sitting at Ping Shek's feet, said.

"True, most times. Not always. I will question her. I will hear her voice. Bo Low!"

The driver got down promptly. Ping Shek was well obeyed, and without delay.

Ping Shek was fat: she ate abundantly.

The serving-woman scrambled down hastily.

They gave her their shoulders. They held up their helping hands.

Ping Shek groaned and descended—after several false attempts.

Then she turned and cursed them both for their awkward, inadequate aid.

When she regained her breath a little she spat them a final term of abuse, and waddled off towards the cherry tree.

Li Soo saw her coming. She had seen the cart before

Ping Shek had seen her. But Li Soo had wasted no time on the cart, she paid no attention to approaching Ping Shek. You He had promised an extra coin on pay-day, if Li Soo had the cherry tree stripped by sunset. Twenty carts and fifty richly clad, fat old women would not have diverted Li Soo's attention from the fruit-heavied branches.

But when the woman spoke, the girl up on the ladder had to turn and reply. For the woman was old.

Ping Shek smiled; the girl's voice was lute-sweet. Her teeth were perfect.

"Are you wife or daughter here, fair-one?" the woman demanded, ignoring the testimony of the soft half-fringe on the girl's forehead.

"A coolie servant-one, great lady."

"My throat is parched. Give me of your fruit."

"It is not mine. I am paid to gather it." But Li Soo stripped a long branch quickly into her flat basket and leaning down proffered it.

"Come sit with me. I have good words for you."

Li Soo hesitated.

"I am commanded to gather all the cherries before the hour-of-the-dog. I dare not disobey."

The woman squatted down, made herself quite comfortable, drew out her pipe and lit it, before she spoke again.

"Chut!" she said. "Come to me. I will speak wise, kind words to you."

Old age must be obeyed. And Ping Shek had taken a coin from her girdle-wallet; a coin of more value than Li Soo would earn in half a moon.

Li Soo obeyed.

"Can sing?"

"I was taught."

"Sing."

Li Soo obeyed. She began to understand.

"You were ill-taught. Can you play any instrument?"

"The *kin* and the lap-harp; not well."

"Probably not," the other agreed. She bent over Li Soo, and measured Li Soo's tiny shoe.

"Your lilies might be worse," the woman admitted.

Li Soo smiled. She knew now.

Well, why not? If the woman would pay enough!

Though the flower-boat woman pressed and urged it, the bargain was not concluded that day. But when they parted they both knew that it would be. Terms were the one question left between them.

Ping Shek creaked up and waddled back to her cart. Li Soo scrambled up on the bamboo ladder, and gathered the rest of the cherries furiously but carefully.

At dark the tree was fruitless; its last ruby-jewel lay with the red others stored in the great bamboo baskets. Li Soo was content. Her arms were tired, her hands bled, her feet ached and pricked lamingly. But the extra coin that You He had promised would be hers on pay-day.

Half-way back to her waiting cart the woman turned, stood still, and studied the girl again.

Yes; she must have her. Better a few extra coins than lose such a prize. At twice what she had intended to pay, it would be an excellent investment.

The cold old eyes sparkled, almost softened at the picture that Li Soo, the cherry-jeweled tree and the lambent day made.

Lithe and lovely, every line beautiful, every movement graceful, Li Soo was gathering with both tiny hands. Her tiny shoes clutched the bamboo rung securely—an exquisite feat for little crippled lilies to accomplish. A knee, pressed firmly against the pliant ladder, balanced her on it expertly.

When Ping Shek came back a dozen days later the bargain was concluded. And when the deed had been signed and witnessed, the first and considerable payment made and safely stowed, Li Soo said good-by to the rice she loved, good-by to the fruit trees and flowers, good-by to dis-

gruntled You He and to the coolie women—several of whom envied her much—and climbed into the cart after Ping Shek: the cart that would carry her to Ping Shek's flower-boat at the canal-side of a *fu* city. And Li Soo's face was as calm as a smooth sheet of wax.

She looked no calmer than she felt.

Li Soo had driven a shrewd bargain with old Ping Shek. She had busied herself, during the twelve days, learning the exact conditions and wages of flower-boat attendance. She had learned that the woman's boat was where the woman had said that it was. She had learned that Ping Shek's means were substantial; that what she owed, Ping Shek could pay. The old boat-woman was said to treat her girls well. Li Soo did not doubt it. She was convinced that Ping Shek was prosperous because a business adept. Ping Shek would care well for her human instruments, keep them happy and content—in tune.

Li Soo, not Ping Shek, named their terms.

Ping Shek screamed.

Li Soo laughed, and reiterated her figure.

Ping Shek raved.

Li Soo would not come down.

Ping Shek made to go.

Li Soo bade her farewell sunnily and with great courtesy.

Ping Shek turned, and searched the other's eyes. And Ping Shek knew that her own hard will was overmatched.

The bargain was concluded—perhaps the first bargain between Chinese buyer and seller concluded without any abatement of the first asking price.

The woman protested and grumbled, and paid.

She offered to be the girl's banker, to take care for Li Soo of Li Soo's new wealth. Li Soo refused. She had made her own arrangement for the safe stowing of her money.

Pink Shek shrugged. Indeed it was nothing to her. She'd not have robbed this new pretty-one. Ping Shek had more profitable ways than that of increasing her own wealth.

Li Soo did not slip away; she went openly. Even You He could not blame her sincerely when he learned the amount that Ping Shek had paid.

Many a farmer's daughter would have been proud to have been chosen as Li Soo had been chosen by experienced and rich Ping Shek.

Li Soo was neither proud nor ashamed.

She was coldly satisfied.

Selfishly, she would have preferred to have stayed with the rice and cherry trees of You He. She throve on the beauties about her here, she liked the wholesome industries, she was fond of the cattle and fowls. She liked the quiet sounds of the quiet countryside.

She would miss the beautiful, honorable rice.

But more and more she heard a call. Li Soo obeyed it, and placidly went with Ping Shek.

She had no pride in going. She was indifferent alike to envy and pity.

She had no shame at going. The new industry to which she had pledged herself for a specified time at a specified price was not of fine repute, but it was acknowledged: a necessity and something an art. If the flower-girls' caste was low, it was higher than the actors'. This was social advancement for the intimate of Chu-Ko Yen the actor. She had been careful not to tell Ping Shek that she had belonged to an outcast actor.

Sometimes a flower-girl was lucked to become an honorable concubine in a rich man's happy courtyard. The girl who in filial piety gives herself to the flowery service has approval and rank of her own; if not even respect.

Li Soo did not wish to make her way into a rich man's home-retinue. If the opportunity came, she would refuse it. She cared for no man's approval and breveting respect, still less for any woman's.

She had saved enough now to pay her quick way to Shantung. A few moons more, and she could save enough to buy a large measure of best white rice.

But Pang Kee's moons grew few—if Pang Kee still lived. Li Soo believed that Pang Kee lived.

More and more she heard her mother call her. More and more Li Soo's heart quickened to the call of Pang Kee.

She remembered and appreciated much, that at its time she scarcely had noticed, of her mother's tender goodness to her, self-sacrifice for her.

She was going to her mother; going in love—even more than in duty—to repay the little she could.

But she ached to go to the mud-hut richly clad, splendidly chaired, servant-carried, gold in her wallet. The wish was not for herself. It was for her mother.

For Pang Kee's sacred sake she longed to go to Pang Kee with all the evidences of being a doting husband's richly-left widow; that Pang Kee's heart might be glad.

Even if time had dulled or blinded the mother-one's wearied eyes, her feeble hands would know the feel of rich silk, her eager ears hear the clinking of gold and silver; she would recognize abundance and ease.

To give her mother that would require more money than Li Soo could hope to earn from the wage of You He.

Ping Shek had paid her a generous fraction of the sum she needed. It would grow where she had stored it. Ping Shek would pay her a fifth-part of what she earned. A half of every gift a client gave her would be her own. There might be gifts which she could entirely secrete from Ping Shek.

Li Soo chose to go onto the gilded flower-boat as a short-cut to Pang Kee, luxuries and security for Pang Kee; above all, Pang Kee's great satisfaction in having done so richly well for Pang Soo.

CHAPTER LI

LI SOO the flower-boat girl—they called her Crimson Dove—stood at the open window. She was dressed for customers, but none had come yet. The fantastic

house-boat kept open house all the time. Ping Shek never turned money away; and of her seven girls always one was painted and perfumed, scrupulously and gorgeously dressed.

But a visitor rarely came from sun-high to sun-set. The girls were safe enough to loll about in loose, untidy raiment, gossiping or dozing, their faces unpainted, their hands unready, old easy shoes on their tiny squeezed feet.

But it was the rule of the boat that always one waited and watched for any stray client that might come or be inveigled. And no flower-girl broke a rule of Ping Shek's.

It was Crimson Dove's turn to-day.

She was weary, out of sorts; weary of her trade; she always was when it was her watch day.

The details of her trade bored her; she rebelled against confinement, banishment from Nature.

She had not been out to-day. The other girls never went off the boat, except to be taken to some rich customer who had sent to Ping Shek for a sing-song girl to companion him for a few hours or to amuse his guests.

But Crimson Dove went abroad; not to ply their nefarious industry, but because she would not stay with Ping Shek unless she had the occasional freedom; and Ping Shek, valuing her for the girl's exceptional earnings, dared not thwart her altogether. And often in the late morning Li Soo, paintless, peasant-dressed, was poled where she directed, in a tiny skiff kept for the coming and going of boat servants and messengers. Usually Li Soo bade the pole-men push off to where the water was uncrowded. And there she'd lie for hours on the cushioned deck, resting, breathing clean fresh air, basking in the sense of personal freedom which was her chief pleasure now, watching sky and tree-hung banks, and dreaming of the day when she had earned enough, and could go to Pang Kee. Sometimes she landed near the City's water-gate, hired a chair and had herself carried through the busy streets, looking lazily at their sights. She rarely tired of watching people.

She never wished to know them, never wished that she might speak with them. On occasions she bade the bearers stop at bazaar or shop, and descending from the lowered chair made some careful purchase for herself or executed more indifferently a commission for Ping Shek.

This morning Crimson Dove had longed to go out, to hear the skiff-poles cut and pull in and out of the water, to feel fresher air on face and throat, to listen to a more silence up the river. Because it was her watch day she had had to forego her desire.

The small disappointment had jarred her, annoyed her still. Little Pang Soo never had taken disappointment well. Crimson Dove the flower-boat girl took it as ill: self-willed still.

She was weary of the life she led here. But her sullen face cleared a little as she thought of the coins she had earned and saved. She almost had enough now. Her last here grew steadily nearer. For Li Soo did not intend to wither on a flower-boat; grow old here and be dismissed. Nor did she plan to secure permanent courtyard employment, even marriage perhaps, from some rich client whom she had the luck and skill to please greatly. Such was the dream of most such girls—pretty painted children of pleasure—but Li Soo did not wish it, would not have accepted it.

The vision that had come to her in the rice-field stayed.

She had almost enough. When she had enough she'd go.

Crimson Dove yawned.

Another boat passed so close that it almost grated against the crimson landing-planks below the flower-boat's lacquered easy ladder.

The flower-girl did not turn her face toward the other boat. No customer would step onto the welcome-plank at this hour. Ping Shek's rule, that always a "flower" must show, and watch, at an open window, was absurd.

The boats were very near; oddly different Chinese boats.

The moving boat lay flat and small on the water; a plain,

cheap boat, mat-hooded. A naked urchin and an old woman poled it.

The flower-boat, all gilt and elaborate openwork, looked what it was. Moored there, it rose high-curved above its gilded deck: a long carved nut of gold on the amber water. Curtains of gay silk hung at its several windows. Baskets of flowers hung between silk lanterns. A pleasure boat of song and laughter; its key-note was invitation.

The humble mat-hooded boat scraped against the "flower" house-boat. The passenger rebuked the careless urchin sharply.

Half mechanically, Crimson Dove stretched up an indifferent hand, found the mallet, and struck the bell hanging above her. The bell was clear and musical. Its sweet notes called a double message. Called to the man in the other boat, "Come aboard; pleasure awaits you here—hot wine, tiny golden-lilies, soft music." Called a warning to Blue Moonlight to deck herself quickly and be ready to take Crimson Dove's place at the invitation-window, if Crimson Dove secured the probable visitor and went with him to the lamp-lit, cushioned wine-room.

Blue Moonlight scurried to obey.

The man down in the other boat did not look up.

Crimson Dove yawned, but because Ping Shek might be watching her—you never knew—she took a flower from her coat and tossed it deftly onto the man's sleeve.

Again he rebuked the boy whose ill-polling had driven the boat of honest industry so provocatively close to the floating gilded wine-boat.

Looking up at last, to threaten the boy, the man saw Li Soo at the watch-window.

He knew her. The thick mask of the paint did not hide Li Soo's face from Shu A-fah.

He sprang up so abruptly that he upset the boy he barged against. The boy cried out and lost his hold of the push-pole before he giggled. The low boat jerked and swerved —a little more, and it might have turned turtle.

Crimson Dove glanced down indifferently at the new commotion, shrank back too late as her eyes met Shu A-fah's; he had swarmed up the lacquered ladder instantly.

But quickly as he moved, Li Soo had seen that he was lame, saw one foot drag a little as he climbed.

"Lily-one!"

"Come not here."

"I *am* come. Kwan has brought me to you."

There was no welcome in Li Soo's eyes.

"I tell you, go."

Shu A-fah smiled, gently as a mother at a petulant child.

"I go not," he said quietly.

For a bitter moment the girl feared that he might tender a gold-piece that would buy him right-of-way on the flower-boat of Ping Shek. Li Soo's being cringed.

"I go not without you," he added.

Li Soo laughed almost kindly in her relief. Underneath her rouge her face grew red and hot with shame that even for the frightened instant she had thought so meanly of Shu A-fah.

"Li Soo," she told him, "Crimson Dove the flower-boat-one, chooses her own times to go and to come."

Shu A-fah caught the window-rail so fiercely that it almost snapped in his hands.

"What do you here, Shu A-fah?" she snapped.

"Serve you, lady," he murmured unsteadily.

"I need no service."

"A *true* servant always is of some value, O Pang Soo," he urged gently.

Li Soo frowned.

"This worm craves your forgiveness, eminent Li Soo. The name, that my heart has cherished since first I heard it, slipped from my uncouth lips."

"Why have you come?" Crimson Dove said coldly.

"To beg your permission to follow near you, your servant. To give you my strength, and—if you needed it—the protection of that man-strongness."

Li Soo shrugged contemptuously.

"How did you find me?" she demanded ungraciously.

"I found a clue—and I followed it. I should have found you if it had taken my lifetime. Had it been less the one aim of my heart, often it was of such difficulty, so pathless in such darkness, that this your servant might have relinquished it. Shu A-fah did not relinquish it. Nothing is impossible to sufficient affection."

"Much is," the woman said bitterly. "It cannot bring life from a grave. It cannot undo a blow that has marked a woman. It cannot gather rice from a stone."

"Lady," he whispered convulsively, "I have coins." Every moon my small prosperity quickens. Come with me, I entreat you. I will serve you well."

She looked steadily in his imploring eyes.

The man waited. His face grew imperious, not less tender.

Intensity was taut and strained between them.

Li Soo snapped it.

She knew that she might have yielded, had he found her elsewhere, working at a harvest-field, winnowing grain, gathering wood; but she could not yield to him here.

And an old rebellion churned up in her.

There would be no contented yielding for Pang Soo until she had accomplished the one purpose to which she had pledged herself years ago in the melon-patch, pledged herself in the rice-field, pledged herself fiercely when she had made her bargain with Ping Shek.

Crimson Dove broke the tension between them; but because she remembered, she broke it gently.

"You limp, Shu A-fah. Will you go lame always?"

"A little lame," he told her. "It does not pain. Ungainly for you to see, it does not inconvenience me."

"He broke your foot! I heard the bone!"

Shu A-fah said nothing.

"It was then you got the hurt; when you fought him for me?"

Shu A-fah did not answer.

"Tell me true-word," Pang Soo commanded.

"It was then, lily-one. It is nothing."

The smile her eyes gave into his answered him.

Her fingers found his sleeve, touched it kindly, slowly.

The man shook as young bamboos in storm-time.

And Shu A-fah made his appeal: the great appeal.

Pang Soo trembled under its passionate power.

Had he wooed her so when they sheltered in the deserted homestead, or when they journeyed together from it, she must have yielded.

Here she could not. And, too, she remembered that it was her lover, whom she had loved, to whom she had borne, that had lamed him.

"Let us wed," he pleaded. "We will buy much rice, and take it to our honorable old-one."

"I have soiled me, Shu A-fah."

"It was not," he cried.

Then she told him; gave words to her moons with the actors; put it harshly.

"It *is* not!" Shu A-fah said proudly.

CHAPTER LII

WHEN Shu A-fah realized that she would not come with him, "Then," he said quietly—all his passion beaten out of him by the blow of her firm refusing—"I stay with you."

"Here you cannot stay."

"I will buy employment from the boat's keeper. I will stay here the flower-boat's servant: a scullion, a run-message coolie. I will not leave you, Pang Soo."

But he left her.

She bribed him to it at last with a promise that she would meet him in three days at dawn-time in the courtyard of the City-god's temple.

"Go then now. And I will come. I shall be punished with severeness if we are found here talking in friendship. Tell no more word of your love to me here! In the temple courtyard I will listen."

And Shu A-fah, believing her, went.

Blue Moonlight challenged her as she turned from the window.

"No, he would not stay, after all," Crimson Dove answered. "He but dallied, teased me."

"Devil-one! And I have arrayed me to take your place at the window. Rats gnaw him!"

"Take my place, then," Li Soo said. "I would rest. If you strike the bell, I will relieve you."

"But, Ping Shek?"

"I will make it right-thing with her. Even a flower-boat sing-song may lie down in illness. Ping Shek shall not blame you, I pledge you promise."

"Are you ill?" the younger girl cried anxiously. She loved Crimson Dove.

"I shall say so, if we are questioned. Get into the window-place. I will sleep a little."

Crimson Dove went off yawning. Blue Moonlight, little loath, turned to the window. It was cooler there, the air was pleasant. And always there was something to see from the window.

Li Soo did not lie down.

She packed; stealthily and carefully.

When the lanterns were lit, making the almond-shaped golden boat glitter a bouquet of jewels on the water, Crimson Dove took her lap-harp, and sat on her high-perched cushion in the "guest hall."

When Sun P'in, the rich pawnbroker, came her eyes glowed black diamonds, and her smile was very sweet. Sun P'in thought that she never before had played so well, sung so delightfully as she did to-night. Ping Shek thought

so too; Ping Shek was greatly pleased with her Crimson Dove.

When they were alone Crimson Dove played Sun P'in well, played him to her full bent. When he went he had given her the sapphire.

She had enough now!

At noon Crimson Dove went to the city on an errand for Ping Shek.

Blue Moonlight, watching at the window, watching the small skiff go, wept. Blue Moonlight had hidden the basket in the skiff. She knew that Crimson Dove would not come back.

Li Soo laughed softly when she bade the boatman wait for her beside the water-gate.

She had made her last escape.

CHAPTER LIII

WINTER was coming to Shantung. Winter cold and hoary had come to Pang Kee.

She had dragged her low stool out to the melon-patch; to sit and warm her, if she could, in the passing sunshine. She had huddled a sack about her shoulders, another over her trembling old legs. Her coat and trousers were old and thin; she had no others—these must last her life out, and so must her shoes, once warm and comfortable, worn to rags now.

There was fuel in the hut. She would not use it until actual frost compelled her.

There was some meal in the crock. She would not eat it until she was even hungrier.

Neighbors almost as poor as she, but younger and stronger, better able to fend for food and bushwood, had given her what meal and fuel remained to her. They might not give her more. These should last as long as she could let them.

Pang Kee's limbs were failing her. Her hands often shook, her sight was very dim.

She knew that she would work no more.

She knew that she should die alone.

But the old peasant woman was not unhappy.

She was not cold yet, she was not very hungry. Her eyes served her yet to see the yellow of the sunlight sparkling in the air, to see the flame of fire-flowers beyond the melons. She could smell the crisp sweetness of the autumn wild-flowers. And a blackbird was singing. She was drowsy; sleep was good. Kwan was kind.

A tiny white mouse scuttled across a melon-vine. Pang Kee chirruped to it feebly. She'd have welcomed the tiny creature's nearer companionship. If it had come to her, Pang Kee would not have harmed it. She would have caressed it, liking to feel its warmth and the softness of its fur.

But the little mouse ran on; it may not have heard her, so feeble was the sound that the woman's old lips had managed.

It was out of sight now, under the brown leaves of the dry melon-vines. Pang Kee sighed.

But she was glad that she had seen it. It had been companionship just to see it.

It was a long moon since Pang Kee had seen a human face or heard a human voice.

She wished she had kept the cat.

She often wished it.

But the warm sun was good. It was beautiful here. Pang Kee smiled. And when she smiled so, the wrinkled face grew beautiful.

The wild-flowers, the singing bird and the tangled melon-vines reminded her of some one . . . some one she had liked . . . a girl-one, she thought . . . a girl she had loved, and yet had been glad to have go. . . . Who was the girl? She could not remember. . . . Where had she gone? Why? Pang Kee could not remember. But she

knew that the sun was warm. She knew that the fire-flowers made a lake of brilliant flame, and she was glad.

Why were the vines down there at her feet brown and withering? Pang Kee knew! They were thirsty. The woman sighed; she was thirsty too—a little thirsty. And the cold winter moons were nearing. Vines always shriveled and lost their leaves when winter gripped. She was sorry.

Something sweet and good to eat used to grow on these vines. The girl had loved them. And the boy? Did there not used to be a boy here? Bending his back as he hoed very carefully between the vines? But she was not sure. She remembered him very, very dimly—if she did remember him. But there had been a girl! She was sure about the girl. And a great sweetness grew on the woman's puzzled face. . . . Melons! Yes, melons. It was melons that had grown here on these vines, melons that the girl-one had loved to eat. What was her name? Pang Kee gave it up; she had to. But the girl was real. And she had had a beautiful name. She had had a beautiful face and tiny binded feet.

Pang Kee got off her stool, and sat down painfully on the ground. She crawled slowly to where the vines were thickest; perhaps she could find the little mouse. She'd like to hold it in her hand.

The mouse was watching her from a distance that it deemed safe, at least temporarily; alert to scurry quite away, if the woman came nearer.

But Pang Kee did not. She forgot the mouse. Her hand had fumbled upon something else. What was it? A melon! Yes, it was a melon, overlooked till now, hidden under its broad leaves. Pang Kee chuckled excitedly. She tugged. And at last she got the melon off. *Aie!* It would be good to eat a melon again.

It always had been an inferior melon. All the vines had deteriorated since they had lacked Shu A-fah's tending. Even at its best harvest-time this had been a puny melon. Now it was shriveled and rotten.

The woman broke it open eagerly, lifted it to her trembling mouth only to drop it disgustedly. It was past even a starving Chinese's eating. Pang Kee's nostrils sickened.

Pang Kee whimpered, broken by disappointment.

She was very hungry and terribly thirsty.

Terrified, the mouse ran its frightened quickest until it was safe in its hole behind the fire-flowers as Pang Kee, rocking to and fro wildly, began to sob bitterly.

It was then that Pang Soo found her, and knelt down beside her mother.

Pang Soo, satin-clad, jeweled, fur-trimmed, knelt on the ground and put her arms about the rag-clad, trembling mother, wiped away Pang Kee's tears with a soft satin sleeve.

Pang Kee looked at the other questioningly.

She liked to feel the strong arms about her. She stroked the satin coat and smiled at its delicious surface. Then she looked at the other's face again.

And Pang Kee knew her.

With a sob of welcome and joy she called her by her name.

"Pang Soo! Red lily-one!"

Pang Soo held her mother close, and crooned to her tenderly.

Then she rose, gathered her mother into her arms, and carried her to the hut.

But Pang Kee would not be taken in, whimpered that it was cold there, and darker; and Pang Soo was obliged to put her on the doorstep.

"Mother-one. I have brought you rice!"

"Rice?" Pang Kee croaked the word that she evidently did not understand.

"White rice! White rice that you craved."

The old face cleared, the old eyes flashed—a momentary rekindling.

"Rice! White!" she murmured joyously. "Feed me! Feed me the honorable rice, Pang Soo."

"Quickly I will cook it," Pang Soo promised.

Pang Kee was loath to wait.

"Now," she whimpered.

Pang Soo opened the cloth she had left in the hut when, finding it empty, she had gone to find her mother.

"Look-see how beautiful it is! Spill it not, mother-one, while I make the pot ready."

Pang Kee did as she was bid.

She sat and stroked the smooth white kernels, played with them very gently. And Pang Soo, watching her all the time, stuffed the *k'ang*, filled the pot, found the bowl and the battered old chop-sticks.

It did not take long. But it took a long time for the water to boil.

But all the time the aged child on the doorstep was good. She sat quite still, playing carefully with her toy—a rag full of raw rice.

Even when Pang Soo took the rice from her cautiously Pang Kee did not resist or complain. She sat quite still smiling at the splendid sunset.

When the rice was ready Pang Soo brought it, and sat down beside her mother.

"It is rice even as the Son-of-Heaven eats it, Mother!"

Pang Kee caught the loose fold of Pang Soo's satin sleeve, and fondled it.

"Beautiful!" she said.

"Taste your elegant rice, O my mother."

Obediently Pang Kee opened her mouth; but she would not take the chop-sticks. Nor would she release the satin sleeve.

Pang Soo lifted the little bowl to the mother's mouth, and fed her with the sticks.

Pang Kee munched critically.

And Pang Kee spat the rice out disgustedly.

"Mother!" Pang Soo cried heart-brokenly.

"Vile stuff!" Pang Kee muttered angrily.

"Mother-one! Mother-one! It is the rice that you dreamed of, the white rice that you craved to eat ever since

my first remembering. I gave ten years to get it for you! Try to like it, for me, my mother-one; I, your child, entreat you. Like it for our love's fragrant sake!"

Perhaps Pang Kee heard the tears in Pang Soo's voice, sensed her child's hurt; and quickened to comfort her as she had when the lily-one had been a babe. Perhaps a memory woke, and a dream that had teased and half ruled her for years came back.

She let the sleeve fall. She clutched the rude bowl and clutched the chop-sticks.

"Rice!" she cried. "White rice!"

Pang Kee ate until not a grain was left.

"Delicious," she murmured. "I have eaten rice, white rice!" she cried. "Pang Kee has eaten rice."

Pang Soo was paid.

Pang Soo was happier than she had been since she was a melon-greedy child.

She took the emptied bowl and the chop-sticks from her mother, and put them down.

Pang Soo put her arm about her mother.

Pang Kee laid her head on Pang Soo's shoulder.

They sat a long time so. Neither spoke.

Presently Pang Soo knew that her mother slept.

The sunset was softer, but the fire-flowers still kept their nuptial red.

Pang Soo felt the old fragile form she held grow cold and then stiffen. Grow very, very cold. The white head jerked down with its own weight. The hand in Pang Soo's was terrible ice.

Pang Soo knew.

She felt bitterly alone.

But—over the low hill's brow, the lovely sunset behind him, the fire-flowers at his feet, a man came towards the hut, limping a little as he walked.

THE END